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THE BEST OF REGIONAL VICTORIA

Your *ULTIMATE GUIDE* to discovery*

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* Like Wimmera Mallee's *spectacular* pink lakes

MORNINGTON PENINSULA

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+ THE MURRAY Yarra Valley + Dandenong Ranges *Great Ocean Road* *Ballarat* DAYLESFORD + MACEDON RANGES Bendigo *Gippsland* GRAMPIANS

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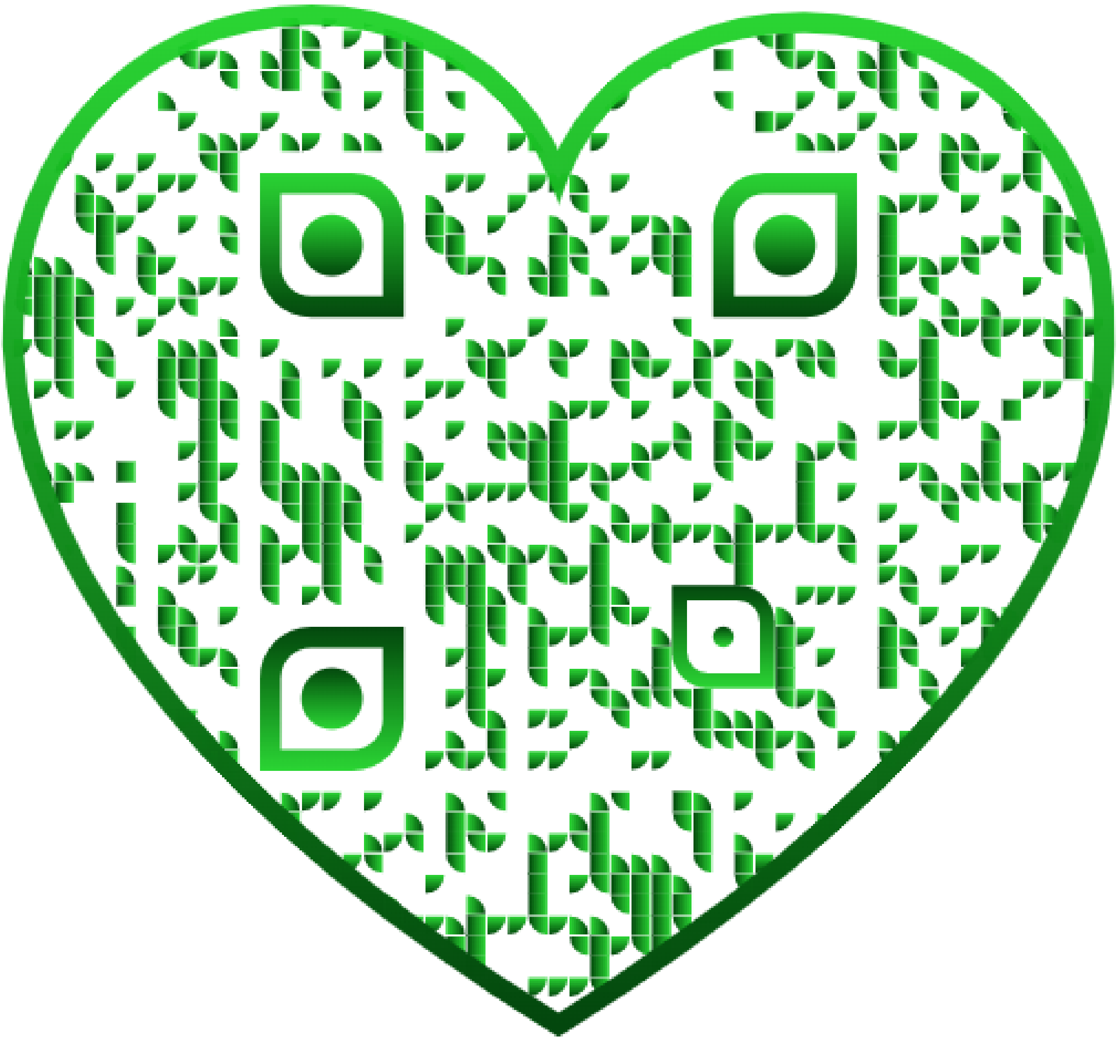

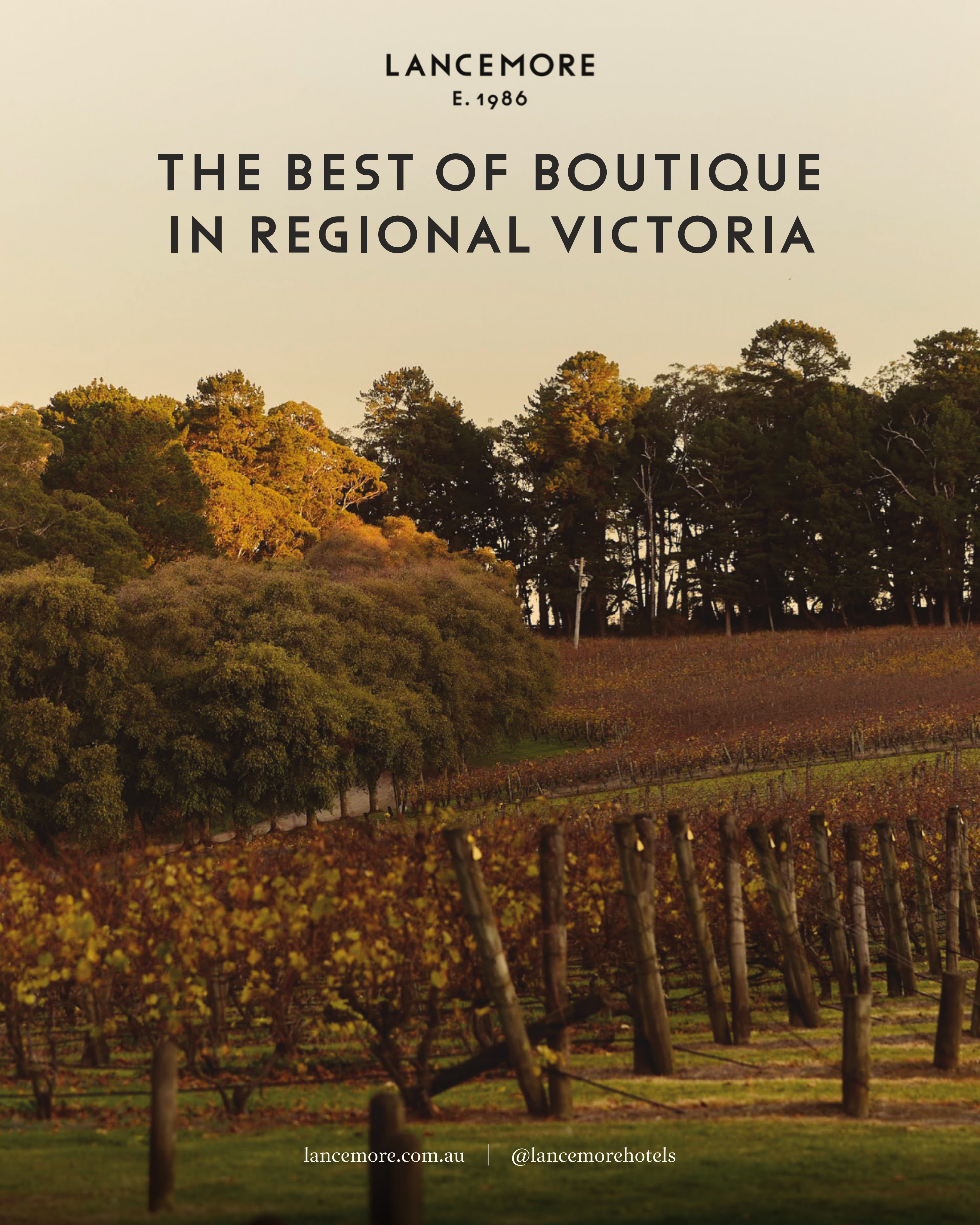

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Lancemore brings together a collection of boutique hotels across regional Victoria — each shaped by its landscape, inspired by its community, and crafted for those who appreciate thoughtful design and authentic connection. From vineyard retreats to grand country estates, every detail reflects a deep sense of place and the art of meaningful hospitality. Designed to slow you down, draw you in, and leave you with stories worth sharing.

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CONTENTS

Special Edition

GETAWAYS

86 **KEYS TO THE RIVER**
Meander through the Murray region's towns and river turns

92 **PIVOT CITY**
Geelong leans into its industrial past to house its exciting new future

98 **ONE PERFECT ESCAPE**
One peninsula, so many options, Mornington is an all-in-one deal

102 **ECO TRIPPING IN HEATHCOTE**
It's easy being green when the whole town is set for sustainability

108 **BEYOND THE ROCKY ROAD**
It pays to go off-script on the iconic drive to find what lies inland

114 **OUT OF THE OFFICE**
Taking work from home on the road with a Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges break

120 **THE MAKERS OF BALLARAT**
Meet the keepers of tradition leading a movement to save past crafts

126 **SECRETS OF THE VINES**
Vine-tuning a grape escape in the wineries of the Macedon Ranges

132 **GIPPSLAND'S GOLDEN TRAILS**
Lace up and put foot to forest floor on the region's most heavenly hikes

138 **RENEW IN THE GRAMPIANS**
An occasional expat recalibrates to bush life in the mountains

PHOTOGRAPHY: PT. LEO ESTATE (VINEYARDS)

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UNEXPECTEDLY BRILLIANT

No passport required

CONTENTS

SPECIAL EDITION

SHORTCUTS

020 **WISH YOU WERE HERE**
Trail of Lights, Mildura
022 **PILLOW TALK**
New and notable stays
026 **WINE & DINE**
Add these eateries to your Vic list
030 **EPIC ICONS**
Must-see wonders of Victoria
034 **GREATEST TOURS**
Experiences to enthral and excite
038 **PORTARLINGTON MUSSELS**
All aboard for deep sea flavour
041 **BENDIGO TRAMWAYS**
A ticket to ride through history

WEEKENDS

047 **HIP TOWN**
Cruising through Castlemaine, Daylesford and the Macedon Ranges
050 **WELLNESS EXPERIENCES**
Soak it up at the best bathhouses
055 **STOP AND STAY**
Hip and happening Healesville, Yarra Valley and Dandenong Ranges
059 **SURF'S UP**
The iconic Bells Beach
062 **CRESWICK'S CURVES**
How this tiny town turned into a mountain biker's dream
066 **PORT TO PENINSULA**
Coastal discoveries unfurl along the Mornington Peninsula
068 **BUCHAN CAVES**
Go deep and dark in Gippsland's enigmatic cave system
073 **LAKE TRAIL**
If you like your lakes pink, salty and peaceful, head to Wimmera Mallee
076 **FIRST PEOPLES EXPERIENCES**
Explore the deep significance of Victoria's First Nations places
080 **TRIPS AND TRAILS**
Whether you're on two wheels or four, get around these drives and rides

CULTURE

158 **REGIONAL THEATRES**
Grand and historic theatres
160 **WHAT'S ON**
What's happening in Victoria
162 **STYLE SEEKER**
Victorian-made eats and keepsakes

AUSTRALIAN
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THE BEST OF
REGIONAL VICTORIA
Your ULTIMATE GUIDE to discovery*
MORNINGTON PENINSULA

ON THE COVER
Location: Lake Tyrrell, Victoria
Credit: Visit Victoria/Safari Global

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers should be advised that this magazine may contain images, names and references to deceased persons.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM VICTORIA, VISIT VICTORIA

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MARNONG
ESTATE

HAVING LIVED IN NEW SOUTH WALES all my life, I am well-versed in its inland nooks and coastal crannies. But for a time, Victoria's regions remained an unfilled page in my travel journey. When I finally began venturing beyond the usual Melbourne/Naarm city stop, what I found in this stunning wedge of the east coast was a true revelation.

From oceanside hamlets misted by Southern Ocean salt spray to ancient places of deep cultural significance, hillsides ribboned with vines and idyllic country towns that are fodder for tree-change fantasies, Victoria's regional destinations are diverse and all-encompassing escape hatches from modern life – as Craig Tansley discovered in the Grampians (page 138).

The beaches along the Great Ocean Road (which happens to be the birthplace of Aussie surf culture, page 59), the Mornington Peninsula, Geelong and The Bellarine, and Gippsland are some of the country's most dreamy. Those cerulean waters tickling sandy-hued boulders, long beaches that unfurl gently and, of course, those limestone sentinels that draw eternal crowds are all fringed by towns seemingly built for endless summers. Sun-dried hair, sandy feet and towels over balcony rails.

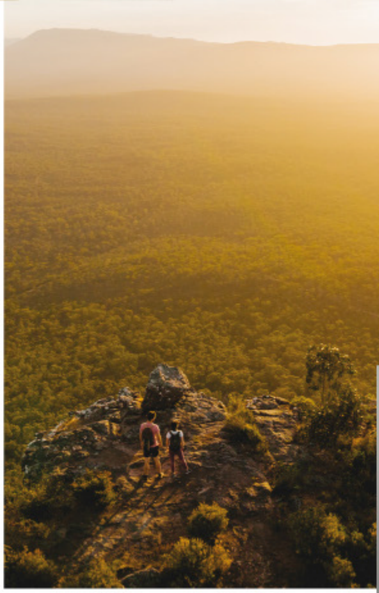
I remember watching shards of light bounce off impossibly clear waters at Moyjil/Point Ritchie as I learned about the staggering longevity of our First Nations people in the region (page 76). While at Daylesford, a modern approach to respecting the season is plated up at Alla Wolf-Tasker's singularly inspiring Lake House. Best enjoyed after an enlivening soak in the region's mineral waters, of course (page 50).

Daylesford's graceful heritage buildings are mirrored in the streetscapes of nearby Bendigo and Ballarat and the smaller villages of Heathcote (page 102) and Castlemaine (page 47). Their gilt histories now being passionately resurfaced for a new type of rush – that of weekend-trippers and city-skippers.

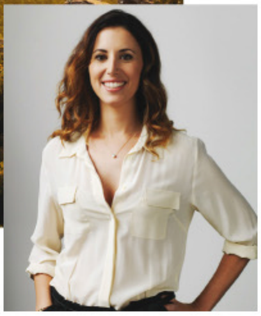
Closer to Melbourne's city limits, you can find that pristine Victorian beauty, where soft afternoon sun illuminates vine leaves and dusk falls in a chorus of native birdsong. The Yarra Valley welcomes for short jaunts (or longer), where you could feasibly 'work from home' for a week balanced with cellar doors and bush walks. We road-tested the idea on page 114 with great success.

My exploration of regional Victoria is ongoing. A journey through the Murray Region is insistently tugging on my sleeve – especially after reading Ricky French's story (page 86). Houseboat mandatory!

I hope this special edition of *Australian Traveller* will have you taking your own notes for an escape into this beautiful corner of the country. Travel well and often!



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *The Great Ocean Road's most iconic attraction (p108); Felix in Geelong is one of regional Victoria's best diners (p26); Grampians National Park is good for the soul (p138); Bells Beach is the birthplace of Aussie surfing (p59).*



LARA PICONE, PROJECT EDITOR

SCAN FOR MORE REGIONAL VICTORIA!

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS COURT (LARA PICONE); TOURISM AUSTRALIA (GREAT OCEAN ROAD); CAMERON MURRAY PHOTOGRAPHY (FELIX); BEN SAVAGE/WE ARE EXPLORERS (GRAMPIANS); VISIT VICTORIA/CAMERON MURRAY/ASSEMBLE AGENCY (SURFER ON BELLS BEACH)

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Bendigo
CITY OF GREATER BENDIGO
Loddon Valley
PLAN YOUR NEXT ADVENTURE AT BENDIGOTOURISM.COM
EXPLORE
BENDIGO REGION
CULTURE | NATURE | GASTRONOMY

Whether you're a wine lover, a foodie, an antiques collector, a history buff, an architecture devotee or an outdoors enthusiast, the Bendigo region, only two hours from Melbourne, offers plenty of opportunities to slow down, savour the finer things in life and discover something new.

Pack the car and drive to a region where rich culture, delicious flavours, timeless tranquillity and golden moments await.

THE BOUNTY OF BENDIGO

As the first Australian city to be crowned a UNESCO Creative City and Region of Gastronomy, quality local food and produce is the predominant theme in Bendigo, and the city is an elegant combination of history and modern cool. City of Gastronomy Officer, Michelle Symes, says that the food culture in the Bendigo region is really broad. The area is home to beautiful restaurants, great vineyards and wineries, and highly skilled winemakers.

"From a yabby farm to vibrant community lunches, the region offers authentic, heartwarming experiences that connect visitors with local culture. Enjoy a pay what you can village lunch prepared by multicultural groups, showcasing flavours from around the world. Discover artisan produce, indulge in high end culinary offerings, and feel the welcoming spirit of a community that's passionate about good food and looking after one another."

In the Bendigo region people truly connect with culture, nature and gastronomy.

Every plate tells a story in Bendigo. The city buzzes with contemporary restaurants with many of the owners and operators boasting distinguished careers at some of Melbourne's finest institutions. Wander through the farmers' markets to pick up artisanal crusty bread, free-range eggs, bush honey, local wine, cheese, fruit, and vegetables. At the local growers market, dynamic new residents from Myanmar and Afghanistan are also enriching the food scene with the flavours of their cultures.

In Bendigo, the streets are lined with heritage buildings that have been revived to meet contemporary needs. The city itself emerged due to one of the biggest gold rushes in the world, and lavish stately establishments house the visitor centre and cafes. Heritage schoolrooms have been repurposed as fine dining destinations, churches have been revived as residences, bank vaults have morphed into art galleries, and significant structures are now theatres and hotels. Local and international art is celebrated inside ornate, grand buildings and every meeting place in Bendigo oozes with the richness of its gold rush history. Stay at Hotel Ernest, a former bank that feels like an art gallery. Book a table at Terrae, located on-site, or head to Alium Dining, inside a former bank.

Before the gold rush, Indigenous Australians populated these lands. Discover the stories of Dja Dja Wurrung, on the Dumawul guided walking tours created by First Nations people who have learned the ancient history of the region from their ancestors. Pre-gold rush stories of Djaara teach visitors the significance of the landscape and the value of the native plants used for food and medicine, while they immerse themselves in the fragrances and flavours of the local bush.

Venture 61 metres underground at Central Deborah Gold Mine, where darkness surrounds you and the sulphurous air evokes the grit of 20th-century gold mining. Then hop aboard the Vintage Talking Tram for a rumbling ride through Bendigo's rich mining history, told through the voices of those who shaped it.

Bendigo is a regional hub for cultural and artistic exploration. The Bendigo Art Gallery will soon be undergoing renovation, but there are plenty of opportunities to see the stunning work of local or creatives and artists in this town.

VIVA la VIDA

Laneways are decorated with vivid street art and at every turn there are galleries containing new and old works. The creative community thrives within the state of the art 1,000 seat Ulumbarra Theatre, formerly the site of the Sandhurst Gaol.

To deep dive into the history of Chinese Australians, the Golden Dragon Museum, built on the site of the original Chinatown settlement, is a colourful, engaging museum for the whole family. See Loong, the oldest imperial dragon in the world, and Dai Gum Loong, Bendigo's new processional dragon which is 125 metres long and ornately decorated with over 7,000 handmade scales. For a unique spiritual encounter, visit the largest Buddhist temple in the western world - the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion. Spin the prayer wheels and offer a prayer to the biggest jade Buddha in the world, carved from one block of stone.

Come and discover the tastes and treasures of Bendigo for yourself.

HEATHCOTE'S HEARTFELT HOSPITALITY

When you think about Heathcote, visions of glasses of luscious, deep red, full-bodied Shiraz come to mind. And it's true, this is a renowned wine-growing region which has long produced award-winning Shiraz, but there's more than one variety to discover here. Boutique, family-run wine businesses are also planting Spanish varieties like Tempranillo, Grenache, and Alvarinho grapes and these wines are gaining popularity.

Sustainability is top of mind for the people of the Heathcote community. At Silver Spoon Estate you can walk the rows and see the dry-grown vines that rely only on natural rainfall and the minerals of the volcanic soil, and not on artificial irrigation systems. A wine tasting in the barrel room overlooking the ornamental garden is a must to experience the range of grenache, tempranillo, viognier and, of course, Shiraz.

Envy Distilling also operates a fully self-sufficient cellar door. Try the small batch, grape-based gin made using a traditional alembic copper still. Knowing that the distillery is 100% powered by solar and that the distilling process uses only captured rainwater makes the award winning spirits taste even sweeter.

For an off-grid, safari-style glamping experience book a night or two at The Yellow Box Wood. Set on 100 acres of natural wilderness, the spacious glamping tents have extensive bush views and maximum privacy. Swim in the mineral salt swimming pool down in the paddock, relax on the deck or gather around the firepit and swap stories with friends.

At Shiraz Republic, red wine enthusiasts can 'rent-a-row' and develop hands-on knowledge about every step of the winemaking process. In the vintage months (February and March) pick, crush and stomp the fruit, then over the course of a year on weekends learn how to press and bottle it. Learn how to prune and train the vines, then collect a bottle of your very own vintage at the end of the season.

The female vignerons in the region are active in the Australian Women in Wine movement and have created a wine trail where visitors can speak with them, taste their wine and hear their stories. At Vinea Marson, you can meet one of Australia's most experienced and treasured winemakers, Mario Marson, who crafts distinctive Italian varietal wines using traditional winemaking methods. On select weekends there are pop-up lunch events that celebrate seasonal produce and regional flavours. Book a table, enjoy live music, play a game of bocce, and indulge in a bottle of fine wine.

Heathcote has much to offer wine connoisseurs, so come and raise a glass to the landscape and flavours of the region.

LODDON VALLEY LANDSCAPES AND LEGENDS

This under-discovered region offers a quiet escape from the city and is the perfect spot to rest and connect with nature. Settle on a riverbank and spend a day fishing for Murray cod, golden perch or trout. Families can spend leisurely days spotting wildlife. Look for platypus in the Loddon River and bring your binoculars to match the waterbirds with the sounds of their warbling tunes. In the warmer months, take a swim in the river in the Bridgewater Swimming Hole, then stop in for an award-winning vanilla slice at the Bridgewater Bakery.

The Kooyoora State Park offers endless nature based experiences. Pack a picnic and hike the box-ironbark forest, up rocky granite outcrops and through native grasslands, keeping a sharp eye out for kangaroos and wallabies. Before sunset, pitch a tent at Melville Caves Camping Area then watch as the sky performs a striking show before being covered in a blanket of stars stretched out across the universe. Lose yourself in the constellations and ancient legends above.

In the Boort region, go kayaking and follow the map that shares the ecological history of the river as you paddle along the Serpentine Creek canoe trail as magnificent birds of prey circle the sky overhead.

Prospectors might strike it rich in the ancient forests but, if not, head over to the beer garden of the art deco Bridgewater Hotel, which overlooks the Loddon River and enjoy live music and a classic pub meal. You can also enjoy a drink from a range of the region's local beer and wine.

At The Fat Butcher in Inglewood, meet the family who have farmed their land for six generations and now sell only local meats through their butchery. Buy fresh, quality cuts of lamb, chicken and beef from a true farm-to-table shopfront.

Also in Inglewood, antique and collectables lovers will be inspired by the quaint stores that dot the streets. Pick up a 70s leather jacket or an early edition book, at the Inglewood Emporium, some kitchen utensils at Sharps Bazaar or some vintage crockery and collectible ornaments at Fusspots.

Slow down and enjoy the gentle rhythm of life surrounded by nature and waterways in the Loddon Valley.

If you're craving a calmer pace, a soothing, nature-based experience paired with fine wine and extraordinary, delicious dining, the Bendigo region invites you to unwind, indulge and explore the delights we have to offer.

Visit www.bendigotourism.com to plan your visit in the Bendigo region.

11
10
12
7
5
1
4
2
6
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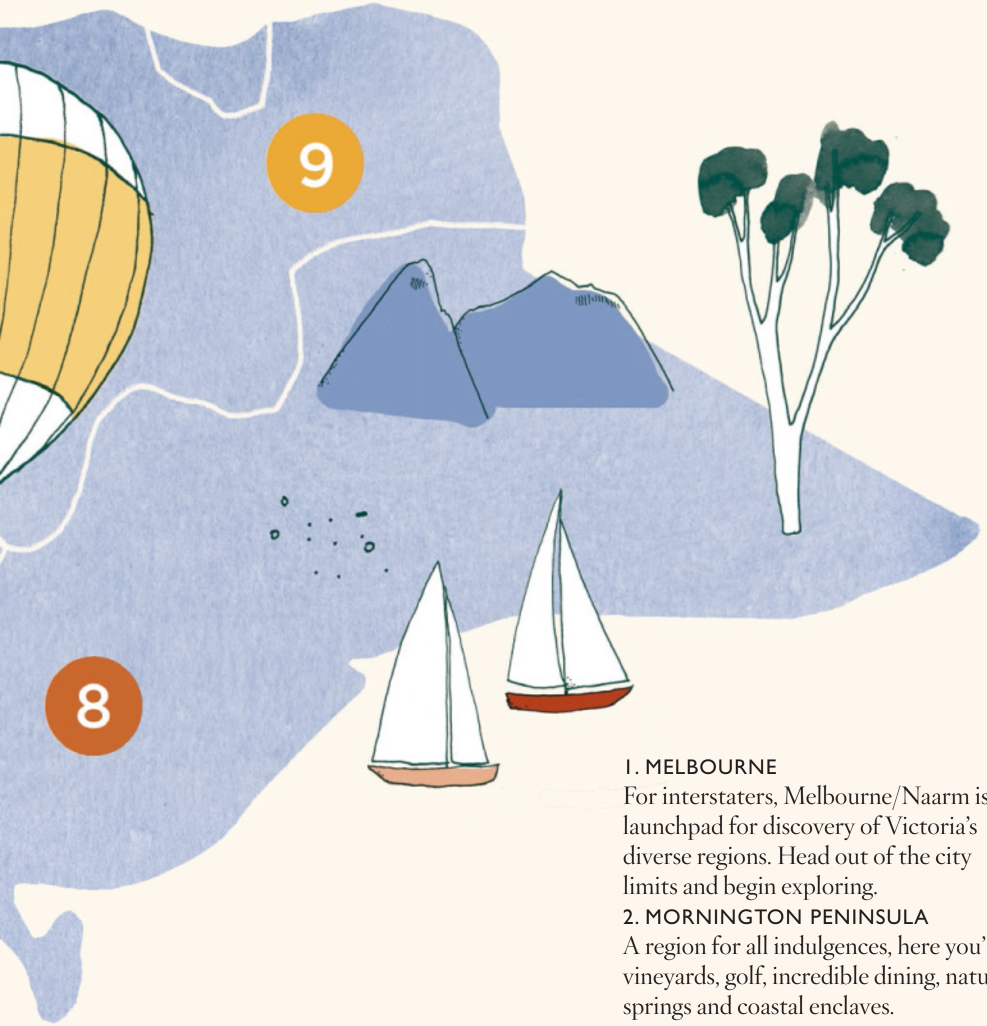
ILLUSTRATION: ESTEE SARSFIELD

EXPLORE MORE

Home to gold rush *TOWNS,* captivating coasts, world-class vineyards and ancient BEAUTY, Victoria's regions are ready for DISCOVERY and adventure.



1. MELBOURNE
For interstaters, Melbourne/Naarm is your launchpad for discovery of Victoria's diverse regions. Head out of the city limits and begin exploring.

2. MORNINGTON PENINSULA
A region for all indulgences, here you'll find vineyards, golf, incredible dining, natural springs and coastal enclaves.

3. PHILLIP ISLAND
Parading penguins might lure you across to the island, but rugged coastal scenery, big waves and little villages will keep you here.

4. GEELONG & THE BELLARINE PENINSULA
A beachside city, Geelong is a vibrant summer hub. Beyond, find nature trails, cellar doors and coastal gems.

5. YARRA VALLEY & DANDENONG RANGES
With more than 80 cellar doors, great restaurants and stunning countryside, this is what weekend dreams are made of.

6. GREAT OCEAN ROAD
More than the iconic coastal road trip, this region is dotted with adorable towns, lush rainforests and gourmet indulgences.

7. DAYLESFORD & MACEDON RANGES
Deep exhales happen here with mineral waters, wellness escapes and seasonal fare all surrounding heritage villages.

8. GIPPSLAND
Home to Wilsons Promontory, here you'll find rolling hills, gentle lakes and crystalline beaches canopied by big skies.

9. HIGH COUNTRY
From summer hikes in the cool mountain air to snowy winter playgrounds, the alpine peaks of Victoria offer year-round pleasures.

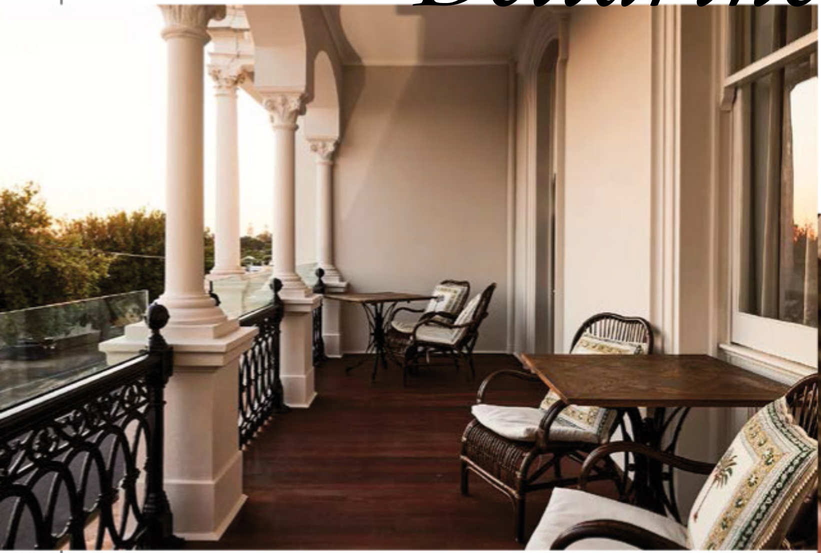
10. GOLDFIELDS
The grand gold rush epicentres of Ballarat and Bendigo make perfect urban bases for exploring this region's many treasures.

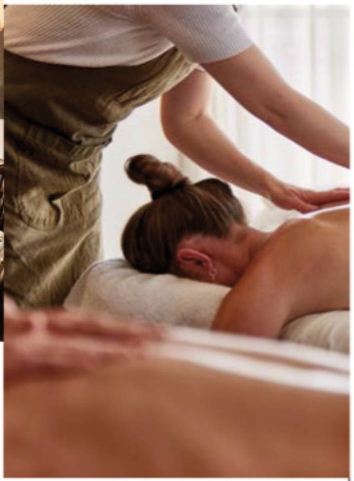
11. THE MURRAY
Peaceful towns and sweet villages edge Australia's longest river, the mighty Murray. Here calm waters are made for slow journeys.

12. GRAMPIANS
Uplifting mountainscapes invite hikes in Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park. Lace up to chill out amid natural wonders.

WIN!

The ultimate Bellarine Peninsula getaway





Enjoy the ultimate luxurious adult's getaway on The Bellarine, just 90 minutes from Melbourne/Naarm.

Cruise into the quaint maritime town of Queenscliff with your car via **SEAROAD FERRIES**; the 40-minute trip from Sorrento lets you skip the long drive and savour bay views, dolphin sightings and a glass from the licensed cafe.

Taste the best of The Bellarine on **THE Q TRAIN**, Australia's premier rail restaurant that passes stunning coastlines, farmland and nature reserves. Continue sampling the region's quality produce with a stop to pick up some artisan goods at **BELLARINE SMOKEHOUSE + PROVEDORE**, with everything from local cheeses and handcrafted sauces to smoked fish and pâtés made in-house.

Next up, head to **LON SPA**, winner of Best Spa Australasia in the 2024 Spa and Wellness Awards. Enjoy a treatment of your choice, ranging from massages and mineral soaks to 24K gold age-defying facials, while relaxing at this private and luxurious retreat.

Find your base at the recently refurbished **THE ROYAL QUEENSCLIFF** for a two-night stay. This opulent three-storey beauty offers adult-only accommodation, tropical garden courtyards and elegant salons. The interior features vibrant modern art, antique furniture and exotic heirlooms.

For a truly memorable stay, experiencing some of the best The Bellarine has to offer, this is a competition you'll want to put your name down for.

HOW TO ENTER

Tell us in 25 words or less why you want to win this ultimate Bellarine getaway.

IMPORTANT DATES

Entries close: 8 February 2026
Winner chosen: 23 February 2026

TERMS & CONDITIONS

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TOTAL PRIZE VALUE: $2148

What's included in this fantastic prize

- The Royal Queenscliff $790 voucher – equivalent to a two-night stay in The Rosetti or The Barrett Rooms (non-peak rates)
- Lon Retreat $500 voucher – treatments at Lon Spa
- Bellarine Smokehouse + Provedore $300 voucher
- The Q Train $308 voucher – a five-course Q Class Dining experience for two adults (beverages not included)
- Searoad Ferries $250 voucher

SCAN HERE and complete the online entry form for your chance to **WIN!**

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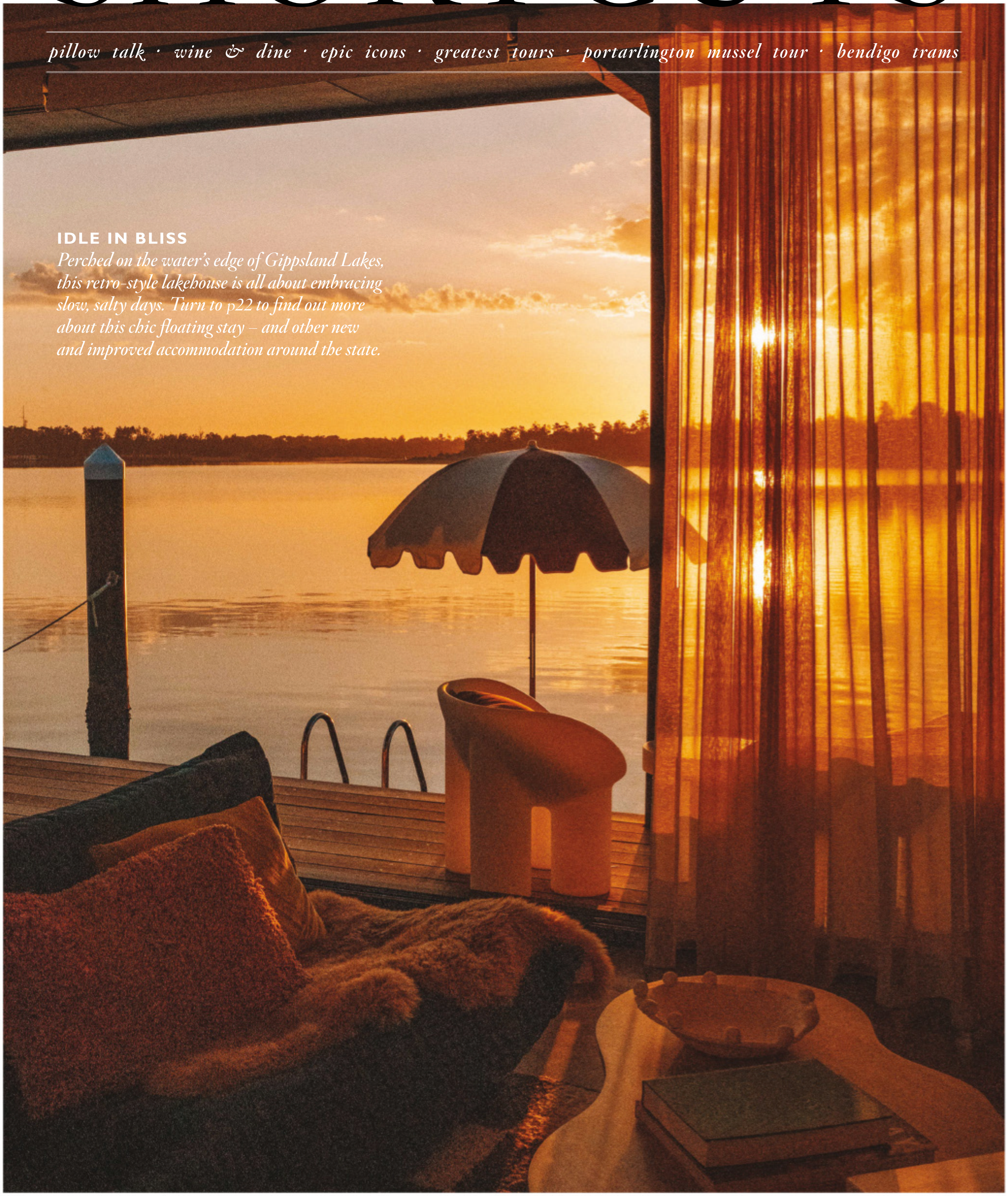


IDLE IN BLISS

Perched on the water's edge of Gippsland Lakes, this retro-style lakehouse is all about embracing slow, salty days. Turn to p22 to find out more about this chic floating stay – and other new and improved accommodation around the state.

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAULINE MORRISSEY

PHOTOGRAPHY: SERENA MUNRO (FIREFLIES, PRECEDENT IMAGE © 2025 BRUCE MUNRO)

WISH YOU WERE HERE

TRAIL OF LIGHTS, MILDURA

"*TRAIL OF LIGHTS* is a silent installation," says Bruce Munro of his meditative work on an island in the Murray River. "It requires nothing other than yourself." The artist behind the landmark *Field of Light* at Uluṟu unveiled a new light installation in Mildura in April 2025, inviting visitors to slow down and immerse themselves in a twinkling display of 12,500 gently glowing 'fireflies', 22 *Gone Fishing* sculptures, and the natural surroundings of Lock Island as night falls. *For ticket information, visit* mildura.com

Hotel Ernest, Bendigo

Settle into this artful lodging in the city centre for a boutique stay with heritage roots dating back to 1864. Each of the 10 suites in this former bank is elegantly styled and furnished with covetable works by Australian artists. Ernest is also home to the much-lauded Euro-style Restaurant Terrae, so be sure to book into the two-level diner during your visit. *hotelbendigo.com.au*

PILLOW TALK

We round up the *LUXE*, the *LOVELY* and the *LATEST* places to stay in *REGIONAL* Victoria.

Islay House, Woodend

Lean all the way into a country luxe state-of-mind with a stay at the gorgeously restored heritage Islay House. This bed and breakfast sleeps up to nine guests and is just a short walk from town, but you'll want to spend most of your time curled up fireside in the elegantly styled rooms as you admire the collection of antiques. *islayhouse.com.au*

NORSU CABIN, MACEDON

Country cabin dreams come to life under the sweet timber A-frame of Norsu. Sleeping eight guests, this Scandi-inspired abode is so meticulously styled it's received knowing nods from The Design Files *and is everything a modern log cabin should be, including cosy fireplace, fire pit, modern appliances and French linens. Perfect for logging out of daily life for a moment.* norsucabin.com.au

NERISSA RYE, MORNINGTON PENINSULA

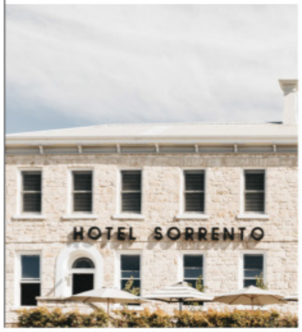
This Rye beach pad is just a 10-minute walk from 16th Beach, and while a morning walk is lovely, returning to the barefoot luxe vibes of this four-bedroom escape is just as enlivening. Bright, open and welcoming, this is the place to settle in for endless cups of tea and a good book between beach jaunts. *nerissa-rye.com.au*

Hotel Vera, Ballarat

This Ballarat beauty set in a 1900s mansion is all bygone elegance edged with modern style. Just seven boutique suites, each with their own distinct personality, makes it a singularly luxe stay. Sister to Bendigo's Hotel Ernest, Vera is similarly bequeathed with a stand-out fine diner, Babae, which plates up the best of the region's produce. *hotelballarat.com.au*

Hot to book:

The historic and iconic, clifftop Hotel Sorrento at Port Philip Bay is mid-refurb and will reopen 1 December 2025, just in time for Amalfi-style beachside stays. *hotelsorrento.com.au*



WORDS: LARA PICONE. PHOTOGRAPHY: NICK SKINNER (NORSU CABIN); KATE ENNO PHOTOGRAPHY (IDLE LAKE HOUSE); EVE WILSON(NERISSA RYE); TIFFANY WARNER (ISLAY HOUSE)

JUN
SLIM AARON

THE IDLE LAKE HOUSE, LAKES ENTRANCE

Enjoy a ripple of serenity when you step aboard this water-top abode on the Gippsland Lakes. Once a Chinese restaurant, this spacious and stylish two-bedroom stay offers unbroken gazing of the shimmering surface in a beautifully private bay. Lounge on the deck and enjoy the onboard bathhouse; come evening, sit by the sleek suspended fireplace. *idlelakehouse.com*

The Monty, Anglesea

Palm Springs makes an entrance on the Great Ocean Road with the opening of The Monty this October. Its vintage motel meets modern muse at this playful boutique stay complete with pool and a vibrant Mexican cantina. You're just a stroll from the beach here, which tells us it's ripe for summer vacays this season. *themontymotel.com.au*

TRENTHAM WATERS RESORT, MILDURA

Another new property lands in regional Victoria in time for an endless summer with Trentham Waters Resort expected to open by February 2026. Breezy, subtly retro and brightened by the big Mallee sky, this river's-edge escape is perfect for settling in for a spell with one-, two- and three-bedroom villas. There's a lagoon-style pool, riverside hot tubs and onsite dining for all your relaxation requirements. *trenthamwatersmildura.com.au*

CROWNE PLAZA, GEELONG

Geelong is getting its own Crowne Plaza in 2026. Its arrival on the waterfront will make it the city's largest (and newest) hotel with 200 contemporary rooms and suites, a Skybar, all-day dining, indoor pool and gym, and event spaces. Keep it on your radar. ihg.com

Arapiles Clubhouse and Crash Pad, Grampians

These 1880-era mountain-adjacent digs have been tenderly restored to provide rock climbers and Grampians country wanderers a chic place to rest. You'll find four bedrooms in the Natimuk stone house, as well as a heated pool out the back and plenty of luxe embellishments. There's also a two-person 'Crash Pad' in the confines of the Clubhouse with its own separate entrance. *arapilesclubhouse.com.au*

RE'EM, YARRA VALLEY

With verdant Yarra Valley views that take in the linear beauty of tended grapevines, the 16 suites and rooms at Re'em are set amid the Helen & Joey Estate and invite sipping and sitting in tranquillity. The onsite restaurant deftly balances Chinese and Australian flavours and if you're staying over the weekend, be tempted out of your stylish room for yum cha that features delicate handmade dumplings and vineyard vistas. *helenandjoeyestate.com.au*

WORDS: LARA PICONE. PHOTOGRAPHY: BIANCA JACKSON (ARAPILES CLUBHOUSE AND CRASH PAD)

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VisitMorningtonPeninsula.org

Find out more

WINE & DINE

There's no shortage of *EXCEPTIONAL* eateries in regional Victoria. From *CASUAL* classics to finely tuned *FINE* diners, here's *OUR PICK* of the plentiful bunch.

Le Foyer Brassiere, Bendigo

From the owners behind Bendigo's beloved The Woodhouse comes this newly opened elegant French bistro. It's all about welcoming warmth at this city fine diner, after all Le Foyer, translates to 'the hearth' in French. A place to linger in the chic, Parisian-style salon, the menu unfurls in the classics, from beef bourguignon to steak frites and mille-feuille.

Riverbank Moama, Murray River

If you're journeying on or beside the Murray, it's only fitting that you dine by its banks. This nature-nestled restaurant by the river is idyllic for a long, sun-filled lunch. The menu is an unfussy playlist of the hits served with a seasonal spin – and the mood is as gently flowing as the nearby water.

FELIX, GEELONG

Soft brown banquettes, walnut hues and a terrazzo bar welcomes with relaxed French bistro vibes at Geelong's Felix. But really, it's the collage of simple, seasonal flavours that make this restaurant an easy-going favourite. Come for brunch or dinner; vegans are welcomed with a dedicated menu.

The Perch, Lavers Hill

A laid-back classic of the Great Ocean Road, The Perch at Lavers Hill welcomes those taking a pause from the serpentine drive. Lunch in the warm-wood dining room is accompanied by vineyard vistas and fleeting cameos from native birds.

THE SHARED TABLE, BALLARAT

If you go for the 'Dine without Decision' option at this beloved eatery, you're free from the tyranny of food envy with a chef-selected procession of dishes that highlight the bounty of the Midwest region. Think mochi gnocchi with pumpkin and XO or Western Plains pork cotoletta.

WORDS: LARA PICONE PHOTOGRAPHY: CINDY POWER PHOTOGRAPHY (RIVERBANK MOAMA); CAMERON MURRAY PHOTOGRAPHY (FELIX)

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Find out more

Barragunda Dining, Mornington Peninsula

This fine diner, which opened in early 2025, has been lauded as one of the region's most ambitious and significant openings in recent years. Set on a 400-hectare, cliffside Cape Schanck property that delivers the kitchen with a cornucopia of produce, it's elegant and honest paddock-to-plate dining at its most refined.

Mount William Station, Grampians

Whether you're staying at this luxe historic station or just swinging in for dinner with friends, the shared table vibe here is country hospitality at its most welcoming and elevated. Seasonal and local produce guides chef Dean Sibthorp's hand for plates finessed with the mountain-fresh flavour of the Grampians.

EMERALD CITY, YARRA VALLEY

You're certainly not in Kansas anymore when you slip behind the emerald curtain from Cavanagh's Whiskey and Alehouse to the diminutive Emerald City. Allusions to the fraudulent wizard and Dorothy aside, this acutely intimate four-seat diner is a curated experience worthy of a road-trip. As you may imagine, bookings are essential.

du Fermier, Trentham

Annie Smithers' intimate, farmhouse-y French fine diner is not at all new, but it is every bit iconic. It's long attracted food-lovers to its charming dining room for a set menu that undulates with the seasons. If you're a gourmand to your core, book into one of Annie's delightfully informal masterclasses.

MESSMATES DINING, GIPPSLAND

This Warragul diner's menu is a well-arranged collection of delicious, farm-forward morsels crafted, quite simply, to delight. Dishes such as French onion dip scooped onto nigella seed crackers and fresh-made pasta tossed with a black pepper and butter emulsion are all about balanced, enjoyable flavours paired with good wine. AT

PHOTOGRAPHY: ARIANNA HARRY PHOTOGRAPHY (BARRAGUNDA DINING); PHIL HOCKING (MOUNT WILLIAM STATION); DJN PHOTOGRAPHY (DU FERMIER); FOTOARCO (MESSMATES)

PEPPERS

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Set on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, Peppers Moonah Links blends championship golf with coastal relaxation. Play two world-class courses, perfect your swing on the driving range, then retreat to stylish rooms with sweeping fairway views. After a day exploring, enjoy casual bites at the Spike Bar or a refined evening at Pebbles Restaurant, where local wines and seasonal produce shine. With hot springs, wineries, and beaches just minutes away, Peppers Moonah Links is the perfect base for couples, friends, and families to escape and unwind year-round.

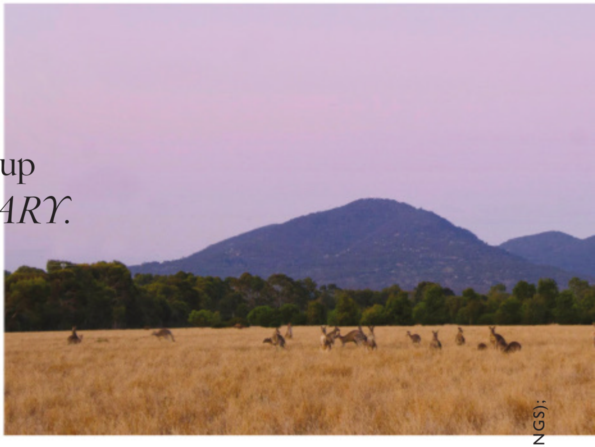
For further information or to book your Moonah Links escape, visit our website or contact our team.

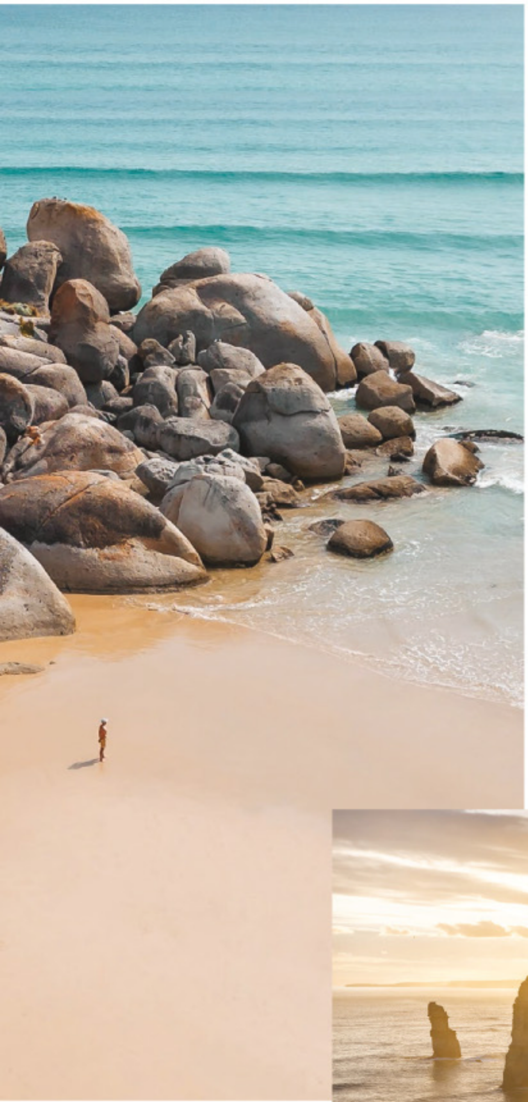
www.moonahlinks.com.au ***03 5988 2000***

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Mount William is the highest peak in Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park; Yarra Valley's soaring Redwood Forest; Kangaroos enjoy dusk in the You Yangs; The Twelve Apostles are a star attraction on the Great Ocean Road; Wilsons Promontory.*

EPIC ICONS

From *NATURAL WONDERS* to historical sites, we've rounded up Victoria's most epic icons that DESERVE a place on your *ITINERARY.*





Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park

From towering mountains to crystal cascades and ancient rock art sites, the Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park is a playground for both outdoor adventurers and nature lovers. Don't miss the views from the highest peak Mount William or the iconic Pinnacle.

Murray River

A natural icon of majestic proportions, the Murray River flows for a staggering 2700 kilometres, making it one of the world's longest navigable rivers. Meandering through Victoria before flowing out to sea at Goolwa in South Australia, the river is home to diverse wildlife, picturesque towns and secluded creeks and beaches.

Twelve Apostles, Port Campbell

These limestone sea stacks are arguably Victoria's most famous icon. After an $8-million upgrade to its lookout, The Blowhole near Loch Ard Gorge/ Poombeeyt Kontapool (meaning breath of the whale) has recently reopened. A brand-new Twelve Apostles Visitor Experience Centre, complete with rooftop lookout, will open in 2026.

You Yangs, Geelong

Rising 300-plus metres from the flat volcanic plains between Melbourne/ Naarm and Geelong, the You Yangs are massive granite boulders named for the local Wadawurrung word 'Youang', meaning 'big hills'. Hiking, biking, rock climbing and horse-riding is popular within this regional park.

Redwood Forest, Yarra Valley

Near the town of Warburton, an extraordinary forest of some 1500 Californian Redwoods stands among native orchids, eucalypt trees and rich birdlife. Planted in the 1930s, these 55-metre-plus trees can live for 2000 years and will grow to be some of the world's tallest.

Wilsons Promontory, Gippsland

The Prom, as it's known locally, is the southernmost tip of mainland Australia. This 50,000-hectare reserve comprises granite mountains and forest, fringed by sandy beaches and surrounded by a marine park rich in marine biodiversity. It's also home to the incredible and imposing Skull Rock formation. →

WORDS: MEGAN ARKINSTALL. PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM AUSTRALIA/TWO PALMS/HARRY POPE (TWELVE APOSTLES); TOURISM AUSTRALIA (REDWOODS); TOURISM AUSTRALIA (WILSONS PROMONTORY) ; TOURISM AUSTRALIA (YOU YANGS); MATT DONOVAN (MOUNT WILLIAM GRAMPIANS [GARIWERD] NATIONAL PARK)

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Hanging Rock Reserve, Macedon Ranges

This six-million-year-old volcanic rock was thrown in the national spotlight thanks to the 1967 novel and consequent 1975 film based on the fictional disappearance of schoolgirls in 1901. Mystery aside, visitors can walk the steep 105-metre summit, fish for trout and go twitching.

Sovereign Hill, Ballarat

Cry 'eureka!' at Sovereign Hill, a living museum to the prosperous Gold Rush era of the 1850s, during which Ballarat produced the most gold in the world. Visitors to this much-loved attraction can walk historic streets, enter a gold mine and try panning for the good stuff, too.

The Great Stupa, Bendigo

Who'd have thought the largest Buddhist temple in the Western world would be tucked away in Bendigo's bushland? Welcoming visitors to explore, this sacred Buddhist pagoda is an epicentre for Tibetan culture, architecture, art and interfaith harmony.

Cape Schanck Lighthouse, Mornington Peninsula

Ensuring the safe passage of ships in the notoriously treacherous Bass Strait since 1859, this heritage-listed lighthouse overlooks dramatic volcanic coast and wild beaches. The surrounding reserve is home to a plethora of wildlife including little penguins, seals and echidnas. AT

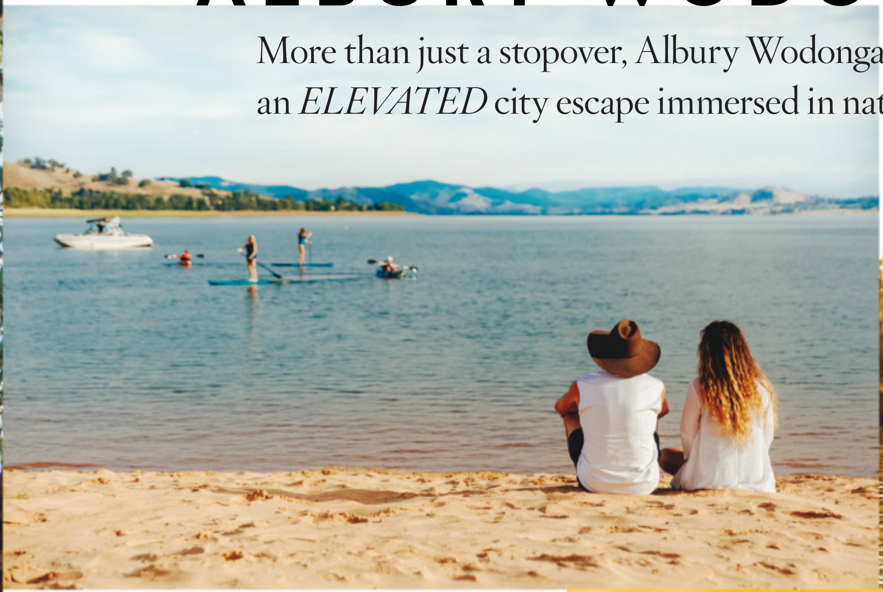
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *The Great Stupa in Bendigo; Enigmatic Hanging Rock; Walkers exploring Hanging Rock Reserve; Heritage-listed Cape Schanck Lighthouse; Step back in time at Sovereign Hill.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM AUSTRALIA (SOVEREIGN HILL); TOURISM AUSTRALIA/TWO PALMS/HARRY POPE (CAPE SCHANK LIGHTHOUSE); VISIT VICTORIA/BEN SAVAGE (HIKING HANGING ROCK); VISIT VICTORIA/ ROB BLACKBURN (HANGING ROCK FROM ABOVE); TOURISM AUSTRALIA (GREAT STUPA)

In partnership with Visit Albury Wodonga

STAY AWHILE IN ALBURY WODONGA

More than just a stopover, Albury Wodonga is an *ELEVATED* city escape immersed in nature.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Lake Hume offers watersports and top views; River Deck Cafe serves up delicious meals; Paddle out from Noreuil Park; Visit Murray Art Museum Albury; See stunning sculptures on public trails.*

Perhaps best known as a road trip stop between Sydney and Melbourne, Albury Wodonga offers a combination of nature, cultural experiences and a vibrant food scene that make it well worth its own journey.

Nestled on the banks of the mighty Murray River and surrounded by famed wine and gold rush regions, this riverside town packs a broad punch. Discover the best of this charming area.

EXPLORING THE MURRAY RIVER

The first stop for all guests must be an exploration of the Murray. Spend time soaking in the picturesque views at the riverside Noreuil Park; set up on the picnic tables under shady trees and cool off with a float down the river. The culturally significant Mungabareena Reserve and nearby Water Works provide more great locations for picnicking.

Explore sculptural works from local Aboriginal artists along the five-kilometre Crossing Place Trail loop, connecting the two original Murray River crossing sites. Get out on the water with canoe and kayak hire, or fish for Murray cod.

WORDS: KASSIA BYRNES PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA
(RIVER DECK CAFE)

ADVENTURING LAKE HUME

Continue the water sports adventures on Lake Hume, a massive man-made reservoir on the Murray River that was once the largest dam in the southern hemisphere. It's a popular spot for boating, waterskiing and swimming, and is also a particularly gorgeous spot for sunsets and sunrises.

Get a view from above when walking along the dam wall. A sealed walkway gives easy access, and informative signs and displays give details about the dam's construction.

Explore further on the 44-kilometre **HIGH COUNTRY RAIL TRAIL**, spanning historic local towns, countryside, picnic locations and swimming spots.

SIP AND SAVOUR

Start the day with the locals' favourite coffee spot, **BEANSTATION CAFE**, inside the historic Wodonga train station building. Enjoy long lunches and river views on the sun-dappled terrace of award-winning **RIVER DECK CAFE**.

Elevate the dining experience at **DUX ALBURY** in the heart of town – sit down for curated wine lists, cocktails and share plates. Enjoy a pre- or post-dinner tipple at **MURRAY'S CRAFT BREWING CO**, where all brews are crafted onsite, or Albury's original laneway bar, **TEMPERANCE AND GENERAL**.

ART AND CULTURE

Gain a sense of Albury Wodonga's vibrant arts community. Check out the sculptures, murals and wrapped infrastructure of the **PUBLIC ART TRAIL**, and see innovative exhibitions from some of the best contemporary Australian and international artists at **MURRAY ART MUSEUM ALBURY**.

Sit down to new Australian entertainment at **HOTHOUSE THEATRE**, housed in a historic building from 1928.

Read more at *visitalburywodonga.com*

TOUR DE FORCE

Get around the natural *BEAUTY* and bounty of REGIONAL Victoria on a guided *TOUR* that reveals extraordinary moments from COAST to *COUNTRY*.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *Swim with dolphins in Port Phillip Head Marine Park; Glide along the scenic Murray on a SUP; Swap your car for walking shoes on the Great Ocean Road; Cycle around Yarra Valley wine country.*

Walk the Great Ocean Road

The Australian Walking Co's immersive three-day, lodge-based walk is absolute bucket-list fodder. The easy-going, guided coastal hike is marked by epic scenery and end-of-day luxury. You'll have no need for heavy packs or tents, instead expect fresh-caught crayfish, post-walk canapés and local wines. Each day explores the drama of this ocean-facing landscape with an approachable three-hour-ish walk, leaving plenty of time to unwind at the lodge. *auswalkingco.com.au*

Swim with seals and dolphins at Port Phillip Heads

Dive into Popes Eye, within Port Phillip Heads Marine National Park, for this wild swimming experience with mankind's BFFs of the sea. On the See All Dolphin Swims 3.5-hour experience, departing from Queenscliff, you'll begin in shallow, calm waters before venturing off to Chinaman's Hat and beyond to meet seals and dolphins in their own habitat. All gear is provided and all ages are welcome. *dolphinswims.com.au*

Get your ghost on in the Grampians

For those with a penchant for the paranormal, get ready for goosebumps when you embark on the Lantern Tours J Ward Paranormal Investigation excursion that takes place under the moonlight in the west wing of Aradale Lunatic Asylum. As you keep a lookout for supernatural activity, you'll enjoy tales of the criminally insane inmates that will make the hairs on your neck stand to attention. *lanternghosttours.com*

Paddle along the mighty Murray

Swoosh softly through the silky waters of the mighty Murray on a stand-up paddle board with Echuca Moama Stand Up Paddle. This gentle downstream sojourn meanders for one-and-a-half hours covering 4.5 kilometres of the river, taking in the beauty on the banks and the vibrant birdlife. From Echuca Moama slip under the Moama Bridge and glide beside its iconic paddlesteamers and the historic port. *echucasup.com.au*

Sip and cycle in the Yarra Valley

Wine and wheels make a great pairing on the Tour De Vines six-hour Yarra Valley tour that weaves through vine-threaded roads. It's a relaxed pace along 20-kilometres of the Warburton Rail Trail as you spot native birds and stop in at local vineyards and produce stores. You'll pull in at a local winery for a tasting and enjoy lunch before hitting up a couple of cellar doors. Depending on your pedal power, there may be time to sneak in a visit to a chocolate or cheese factory. *visityarravalley.com.au* →

WORDS: LARA PICONE

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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: *Make friends with a llama in the Macedon Ranges; Take a subterranean tour of Seppelt Wines; Discover the Mornington Peninsula's flora and fauna on a guided tour of French Island; Cruise around Skull Rock in Wilsons Prom; The southernmost tip is a haven for wildlife.*

Dig for gold in Bendigo

Think you have what it takes to unearth a gilded treasure? Try your hand at prospecting and learn the art of gold-digging (in the geological sense) on the two-hour Gold Nugget Hunter tour in the Loddon Valley. On the tour, mine the wisdom of locals Shane and Jackie – who have honed their hobby of gold-detecting into an art – to learn how to read the land and use a gold detector. You may even go home with a nugget of your own. *bendigoregion.com.au*

Cruise around Wilsons Promontory

It's a thrill to drive directly from the sand into the waves aboard the Wanderer Adventures' bright-yellow amphibious boat. On this 2.5-hour tour, you'll skip along the water to take in Wilsons Prom's top highlights, such as the imposing Skull Rock, The Glennies, Anderson Islets and Anser Island. Spot seals, penguins and seabirds as you absorb the tranquillity of this stunning environment. *wandereradventures.com.au*

Walk with llamas in the Macedon Ranges

If you've always felt an affinity for long-lashed camelids, then bonding with a llama on a leisurely walk might just be the thing for you. Opt for either a three-hour, five-kilometre hike or a longer 12-kilometre trek along the Domino Rail Trail paired with a gentle, hooved friend. Things kick off with a llama orientation, where you'll learn how to lead and look out for your new mate before you hit the track. It's a lovely way to explore the beauty of the region with a sensitive and curious companion by your side. *visitmacedonranges.com*

Go underground in the Grampians

Oenophiles and cave-lovers alike will enjoy going underground at Seppelt's 'Drives'. The largest underground cellar in Australia, The Drives were dug by local goldminers in 1868 and meander for three-kilometres – keeping wine treasures at a temperate 16-degrees year-round. A 50-minute tour through the heritage-listed granite tunnels happily conclude with a tasting of the label's celebrated sparkling wines. *seppeltgreatwestern.com.au*

Discover island life in the Mornington Peninsula

Eject from the mainland on a catamaran bound for the wildlife haven of French Island with Naturaliste Tours. Once you disembark from the boat, you'll hop into a 4WD to explore the pristine flora and fauna, from salt marshes to vast Fairhaven Beach. Look out for echidnas and koalas and enjoy short walks and historic sites on this half-day tour. *naturalistetours.com.au*

PHOTOGRAPHY: CONNOR VAUGHAN (WILSONS PROM BOAT); C MCCONVILLE (SEALS IN WILSONS PROM); BEN SAVAGE/WE ARE EXPLORERS (SEPPELT WINES)

HERE'S THE BEST PART
Popes Eye, Port Phillip Heads
Marine National Park

Coastal days, city nights and country charm. All the best of Victoria is waiting for you to explore in Geelong and The Bellarine. It's one region with three ways to holiday.

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GEELONG AND THE BELLARINE

MUSSEL up in Portarlington

Victoria's 'mussel capital' is the source of EXCEPTIONAL shellfish used by top *CHEFS* far and wide. Step aboard a beautifully refurbished TRAWLER to see how these *PLUMP* and juicy bivalves are sustainably cultivated, just as Chloe Cann did.

PORTARLINGTON
MUSSEL
tours
VALERIE

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: *Blue mussels off Portarlington; Inspecting the bounty; Mussels are a sustainable food; Sampling the goods onboard; Mussels served with lemon and chilli.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA/HANNYN SHIGGINS (GUESTS ONBOARD, CHECKING MUSSELS OFF THE SIDE OF THE BOAT)

A CURTAIN IS SLOWLY WINCHED from the placid, teal waters just off Portarlington, like a floating garland beside our boat. The ropes heave with blue mussels, the star attraction of our tour. But as we reach to pluck our own, it's quickly clear they're not alone; a mass of weird and wonderful creatures has colonised the ropes, turning them into a living tapestry. 'Fairy' oysters, jelly-like sea squirts, and tiny, wriggling skeleton shrimp all inhabit this underwater ecosystem.

We prize our bivalve bounty from the ropes, and minutes later the mussels arrive split on a platter. The plump orange morsels are served raw, ready to be spritzed with wedges of lemon and a lick of chilli as we gaze out over the bay. They're briny, tender and faintly sweet. "This wasn't originally part of the tour," explains Connie Trathen, who doubles as the boat's cook, deckhand and guide. "But a chef [who came onboard] wanted to taste the mussels raw first, and it's now become one of the key features."

It's a crisp, calm winter's day, and the sun is pouring down upon *Valerie*, a restored Huon pine workhorse that was first launched in January 1980. In a previous life she trawled the turbulent Bass Strait. These days she takes jaunts into Port Phillip Bay under the helm of Lance Wiffen, a fourth-generation Bellarine farmer, and the owner of Portarlington Mussel Tours. While Lance has been involved in the fishing industry for 30-plus years, the company's tour boat only debuted in 2023.

It took more than three years to transform the former shark trawler into a dreamy, Hamptons-esque vessel, with little expense spared. Think muted green suede banquettes, white-washed walls, Breton-striped bench cushions, hardwood tables, bouquets of homegrown dahlias, and woollen blankets sourced from Waverley Mills, Australia's oldest working textile mill. It's intimate, too, welcoming 12 guests at most. And yet there's nothing pretentious about the experience – just warm, down-to-earth Aussie hospitality.

As we cruise out, we crack open a bottle of local bubbles and nibble on the most beautifully curated cheese platter, adorned with seashells and grey saltbush picked from the water's edge that very morning. Australasian gannets soar overhead, and I'm told it's not uncommon for guests to spot the odd seal, pod of dolphins, or even the occasional little penguin.

Connie and Lance both extol the virtues of mussels. They're delicious. A lean source of protein and packed with omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin B12, iron, selenium, and zinc. They're cooked in a flash (Connie steams our fresh harvest with cider and onion jam). And they're also widely regarded as one of the most sustainable foods in the world.

"Aquaculture is [often] seen as destructive, so a lot of our guests are really surprised about how environmentally friendly and sustainable our industry is," Lance says. "[Our mussels] would filter 1.4 billion litres of water a day," he adds, explaining how mussels remove excess nitrogen and phosphorus from the water. "And through biomineralisation, we lock carbon into mussel shells."

Despite their glowing list of accolades, these molluscs have long been seen as the oysters' poorer cousins. "It was a really slow start," explains Lance, who says that in the early days of his career "you could not sell mussels in Victoria". But word has slowly caught on. Chefs as globally acclaimed as Attica's Ben Shewry and even René Redzepi of Noma, Denmark, have travelled to these very waters just to try the shellfish at the source, sharing only the highest praise, and using Lance's mussels in their restaurants.

According to Lance there's one obvious reason why the cool depths of Portarlington outshine other locations for mussel farming. "The water quality is second to none," he says, noting how other regions are frequently rocked by harvest closures due to poor water quality. "We grow, without a doubt, some of the best shellfish in the world." And with Lance's bold claims backed up by some of the industry's greatest names, perhaps it won't be much longer until more Aussies uncover the appeal of Portarlington's mussels. AT

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A BARGAIN FOR HISTORY

The *PASSIONATE* community that saved Bendigo TRAMWAYS has kept the story of this city *ALIVE* for generations, discovers Megan Arkinstall.

QUARRY HILL

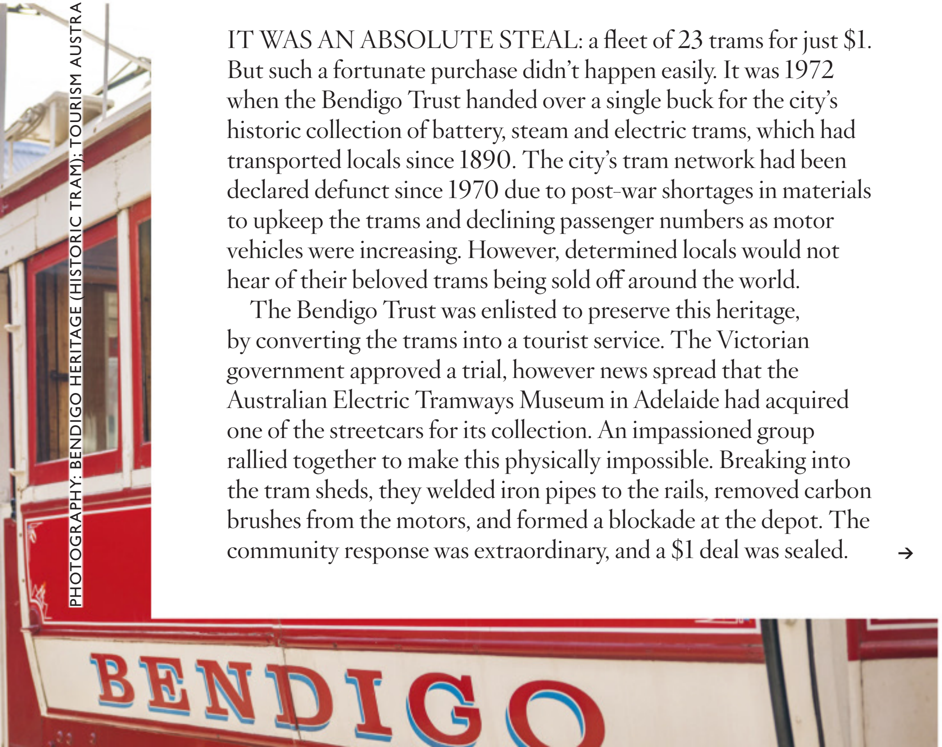
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *Bendigo Tramways is a historic transport line turned tourist service; Visitors can hop on and off to see the city's sites such as the historic post office turned visitor centre; A tram on its way to Quarry Hill in 1957.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: BENDIGO HERITAGE (HISTORIC TRAM); TOURISM AUSTRALIA (REMAINING)

IT WAS AN ABSOLUTE STEAL: a fleet of 23 trams for just $1. But such a fortunate purchase didn't happen easily. It was 1972 when the Bendigo Trust handed over a single buck for the city's historic collection of battery, steam and electric trams, which had transported locals since 1890. The city's tram network had been declared defunct since 1970 due to post-war shortages in materials to upkeep the trams and declining passenger numbers as motor vehicles were increasing. However, determined locals would not hear of their beloved trams being sold off around the world.

The Bendigo Trust was enlisted to preserve this heritage, by converting the trams into a tourist service. The Victorian government approved a trial, however news spread that the Australian Electric Tramways Museum in Adelaide had acquired one of the streetcars for its collection. An impassioned group rallied together to make this physically impossible. Breaking into the tram sheds, they welded iron pipes to the rails, removed carbon brushes from the motors, and formed a blockade at the depot. The community response was extraordinary, and a $1 deal was sealed.

→



GOLD MINE
BENDIGO TRAMWAYS
Nº 30

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *The fleet comprises 45 trams that have been restored; Visitors wait at a tram stop; The old Tramways Depot and Workshop is one of the stops on the hop-on, hop-off service.*

The continuation of the tram service has kept the skills of tram building and craftsmanship alive.

Today, Bendigo Tramways welcomes some 40,000 passengers annually, operating as a hop-on, hop-off touring service aboard the restored trams. Fifteen of the now 45-strong fleet are dubbed 'Talking Trams' because of the taped commentary that is played along the route. The trams loop between Central Deborah Gold Mine and the Bendigo Joss House Temple, which has been a place of Chinese worship since 1871, via other sites including the old Tramways Depot and Workshop.

Keeping things interesting, throughout the year visitors can step aboard different themed trams. Tram No. 302 becomes the Yarn Bomb Tram, decorated both inside and out with colourful crochet by an anonymous group of locals. During the festive season, Tram No. 15 operates as a tinsel-festooned Santa Tram, and the big man himself hides out somewhere along the route for excited children to find. And on selected dates, the adults-only Groove Tram runs nighttime tours of the city, accompanied by local musicians playing live tunes and a pop-up bar.

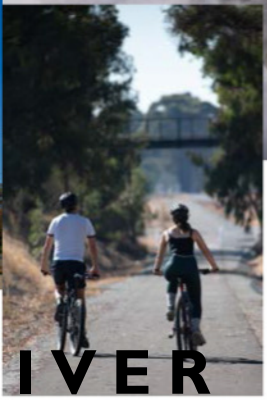
As well as preserving the city's history, however, the continuation of the tram service has kept the skills of tram building and craftsmanship alive in a practical sense. Bendigo's Heritage Rail Workshop is world renowned for restoring heritage trams and repurposing vehicles in creative ways. Locally, for example, Tram No. 918 was transformed into the Dja Dja Wurrung Tram with original Aboriginal artworks by emerging artist Natasha Carter, with special commentary and music that shares the stories and traditions of Bendigo's first people.

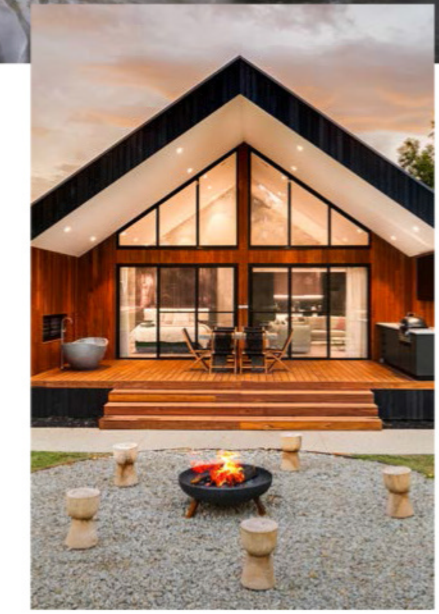
You can't put a price on preserving history. Nonetheless, it was a dollar very well spent. *bendigotramways.com*

SPECIAL
7
SPECIAL
Nº 9

PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA/ROBERT BLACKBURN (GOLDMINE TRAM); TOURISM AUSTRALIA (REMAINING)

In partnership with Campaspe Shire Council





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: *See the Murray River by paddlesteamer; The luxe Goolwa River Retreat; Cycle the scenic Waranga Rail Trail; Check out the Rochester Silo Art Trail.*

WHERE THE RIVER SETS THE PACE

For those dreaming of a *RIVER ESCAPE* that's less rush and more rest, Echuca Moama is the place to be.

WORDS: JANINA WALDMANN

Best known for summer river holidays, Echuca Moama dishes up extraordinary options for those craving good food, experiences and culture. Discover how to spend your getaway in this gorgeous Victorian river town.

STAY IN STYLE

An adventure here starts with the perfect place to stay, and Echuca Moama is famous for its luxury houseboats. Amenities such as onboard spas set **MURRAY RIVER HOUSEBOATS** apart, while **ECHUCA LUXURY HOUSEBOATS** offers extravagance on the mighty Murray.

On land, bathe under the stars at beautiful **GOOLWA RIVER RETREAT**, or enjoy family comfort at **NRMA ECHUCA HOLIDAY PARK**.

EXPLORE THE RIVER

Explore the Murray River with **ECHUCA PADDLESTEAMERS**. To combine sightseeing with wineries on a Wharf to Winery or Port to Plate lunch, cruise with **MURRAY RIVER PADDLESTEAMERS**. Both depart from the Port of Echuca, which dates back to the 1870s.

Those who prefer an active holiday can hire a stand-up paddleboard from **ECHUCA MOAMA STAND-UP PADDLE SUP**, or grab a kayak from **RIVER COUNTRY ADVENTOURS**.

HIKING AND BIKING

On foot or by bike, there are plenty of trails to explore the region. Embark on a guided e-bike tour with **GREEN PEDAL** (or go it alone) to explore the 19-kilometre Waranga Rail Trail, which passes quiet bushland and the scenic Waranga Basin. Bakeries and picnic areas in the historic town of Rushworth provide the perfect place for refreshments.

Take a day trip to the now-abandoned Whroo township at Balaclava Hill. You'll find spots overlooking the impressive Balaclava Mine, plus plenty of picnic sites.

FANTASTIC DINING

Whether looking for a candlelit dinner or coffee in the sunshine, Echuca Moama is ready to delight your taste buds.

Choose **OPA ECHUCA** for authentic Greek fare with views of the town from its balcony.

Enjoy seasonal produce at **THE MILL ECHUCA**, which offers everything from global street food and share plates to classic meals and desserts in a historic building. Discover a local secret at **MONKEE AND CO**, a relaxed Asian-fusion restaurant.

Start the day with excellent coffee and waterfront views at the family-run **WATSON ST PAVILION**.

DISCOVER LOCAL ART

The region's silos have been transformed into impressive towering canvases depicting local fauna, historical links to agriculture and the building of the local railroad. Jump in the car to follow the **SILO ART TRAIL**, which takes you to picturesque villages such as Rochester and Colbinabbin, where you'll also spot surprising murals and street art.

Learn more at *visitechucamoama.com.au*

THE GRAMPIANS
FEELS LIKE
164 kilometres of unforgettable

One of Australia's premier hiking experiences, the Grampians Peaks Trail takes you through Gariwerd's dramatic peaks and ancient landscapes.

It's a journey that stays with you long after the last step.

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day walks, overnight escapes,
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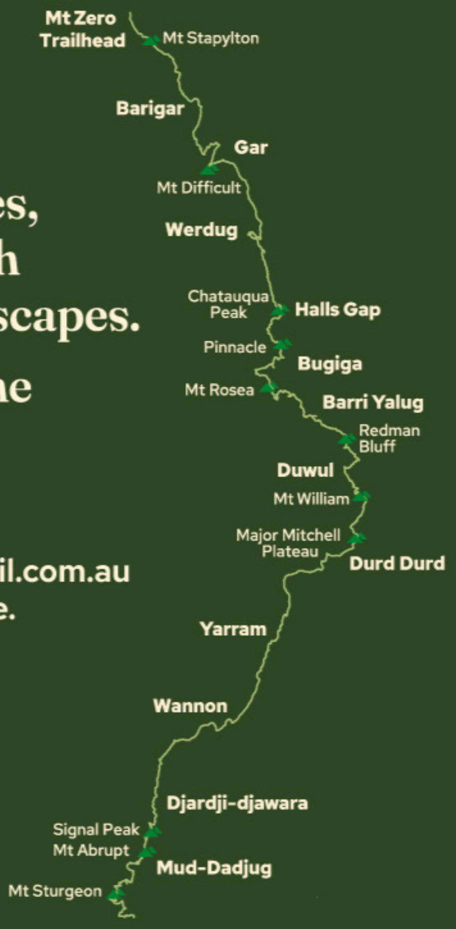
VICTORIA
EVERY BIT DIFFERENT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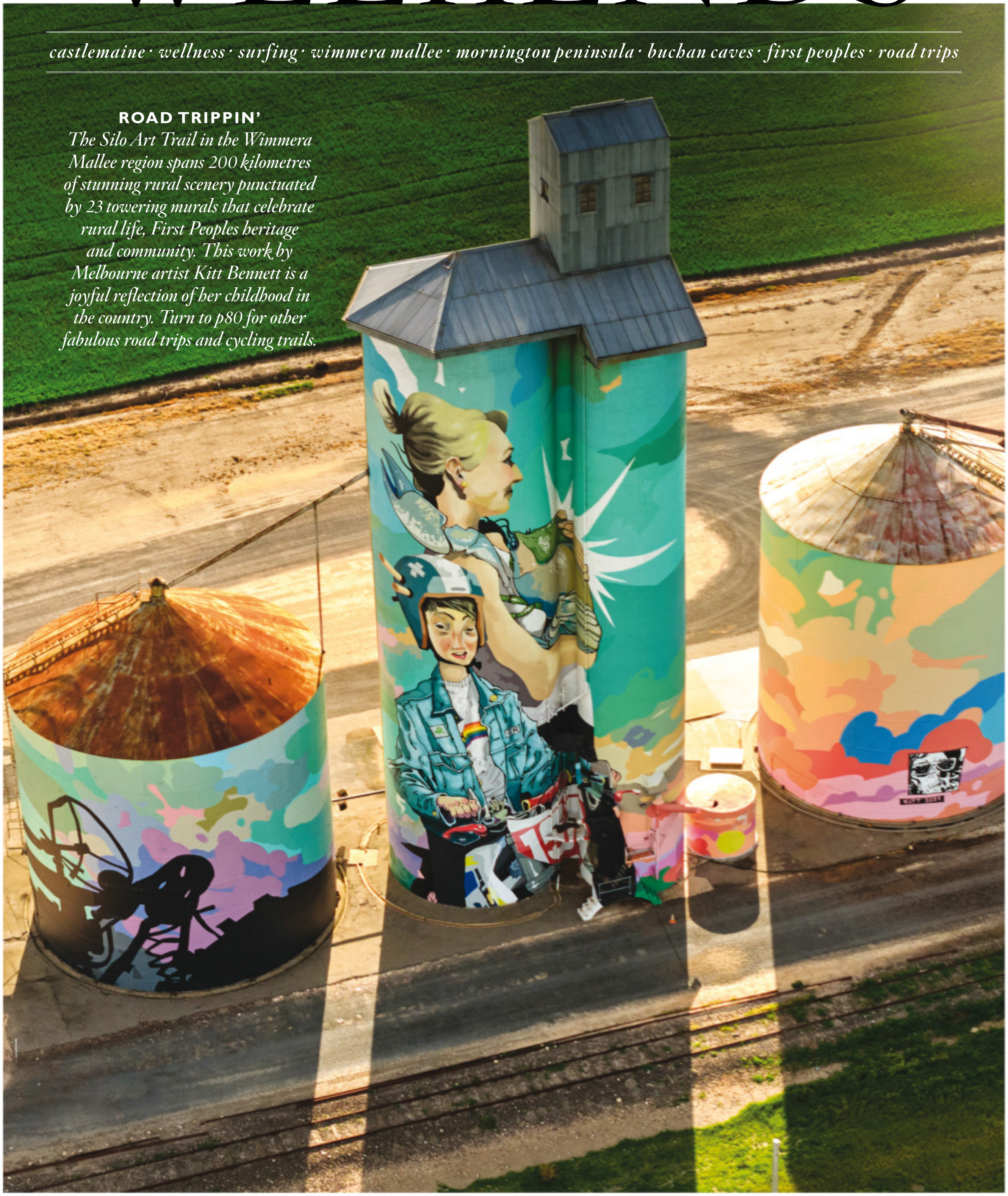
Mt Difficult
Werdug
Chatauqua Peak
Halls Gap
Pinnacle
Bugiga
Mt Rosea
Barri Yalug
Redman Bluff
Duwul
Mt William
Major Mitchell Plateau
Durd Durd
Yarram
Wannon
Djardji-djawara
Signal Peak
Mt Abrupt
Mud-Dadjug
Mt Sturgeon

WEEKENDS

castlemaine · wellness · surfing · wimmera mallee · mornington peninsula · buchan caves · first peoples · road trips



ROAD TRIPPIN'

The Silo Art Trail in the Wimmera Mallee region spans 200 kilometres of stunning rural scenery punctuated by 23 towering murals that celebrate rural life, First Peoples heritage and community. This work by Melbourne artist Kitt Bennett is a joyful reflection of her childhood in the country. Turn to p80 for other fabulous road trips and cycling trails.

PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA

TAKE A MOMENT
SPRINGS | SPA | DINE | STAY

alba

THERMAL SPRINGS & SPA
MORNINGTON PENINSULA

THE IMPERIAL HOTEL

HIP TOWN
Castlemaine

After making a *TREE CHANGE* six years ago, Jocelyn Pride discovers this well-preserved GOLD RUSH town is where an idyllic *COUNTRY* vibe meets the best of CITY living.

'SLOW DOWN' IS THE MANTRA of Tortoise Espresso, and it's apt for anyone visiting town. This local coffee hangout was the brainchild of Lloyd Meadows, who at 16 started it as a hole in the wall of an old pub. Five years on, it graces a fine shopfront with a menu of around 60 different coffees. Other one-off centrally located daytime cafes, such as Saffs, Togs, Saint Florian and Lazy Bones, are tucked into historic buildings and serve creative menus featuring local produce. A personal favourite is Origini, where chef Luca Sartori brings a taste of northern Italy to his rustic restaurant. For the best banh mi outside Vietnam head to Super Hero, and the pastries at Johnny Baker are legendary.

On the town's fringe you'll find some treasured cafes: Blackbird. Grist, Doveton Corner Store, and the cosy Aitken's Corner. The Mill precinct also brings another dimension to Castlemaine. Located directly opposite the beautiful Botanical Gardens, this once-derelict woollen mill is a hive of creativity and collaboration. Retaining an industrial feel, it is home to a myriad of 44 unique businesses, galleries and studios that stretch over the three-hectare site. The Mill is also home to one of Castlemaine's bespoke breweries, Shedshaker Brewing Company and Taproom. Within the sensitively restored walls of the oldest part of the building (circa 1875), small-batch, handcrafted beer features alongside fine wholesome food and live music. →

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Ornate and grand, The Imperial Hotel Building is an elegant reminder of a bygone era; The Mill is home to many local businesses; The Castlemaine Botanical Gardens; Saint Florian is one of many businesses tucked away in a historic building.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: GRIFFIN SIMM (SAINT FLORIAN CAFE); VISIT VICTORIA/MICHELLE JARNI (DINERS AT THE MILL); CHLOE SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY (WISTERIA DETAIL, BOTANICAL GARDENS, THE IMPERIAL HOTEL)

Love Shack
Lager
Red Ale

A more recent newcomer to the brewing scene is Love Shack. Starting small as a laneway pop-up in 2021, visionaries Conna Mallett and Harry Cox were armed with a Melbourne beer culture pedigree, which helped them create a great new 'pub' that feels as though it's been there since the 1850s. Other atmospheric bars and restaurants are dotted around town – Grafting Cellars for local wines by the pour; buzzy Mostyn Street Cellars; Table Records plays vinyl on weekends; and the quirky Maurocco bar is not to be missed.

For food you'll write home about, the hatted Bar Midland serves exquisite dishes from Victorian-only produce. The freshly renovated Wild is located in the original firestation, Voor Ouker specialises in Indonesian/Dutch fusion, and the Railway Hotel oozes English pub charm.

Much-loved Teatro Regio, found in the magnificent Theatre Royal, is the go-to for pizzas with a twist. As mainland Australia's longest continually running theatre, this grand dame is also one of more than a dozen performance spaces that add to a rich and diverse entertainment and festival scene. AT

A traveller's checklist

Staying there

Quirky, authentic and perfectly located, the **MIDLAND HOTEL** (*midlandhotel.com.au*) is a private hotel that dates back to 1879. Each of the nine rooms at the **NORTHERN ARTS HOTEL** (*northernartshotel.com.au*) is different and named in honour of an Australian artist. **CASTLEMAINE BOUTIQUE ACCOMMODATION** (*castlemaineaccom.com.au*) also has a range of properties to suit all types of travellers.

THEATRE ROYAL
THEATRE ROYAL

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Love Shack Public Bar & Bistro is a relative newcomer to the brewing scene; The nostalgic bar and bistro serves comfort food; Theatre Royal is the longest continually operating theatre on the mainland; Dine before a show at Theatre Royal.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA (LOVE SHACK AND PUBLIC BAR); CHLOE SMITH (THEATRE ROYAL EXTERIOR AND TILE DETAIL); TOURISM AUSTRALIA/VISIT VICTORIA (PIZZA AT THEATRE ROYAL)

Simply extraordinary
Vale Hill House

Vale Hill House [Victoria]

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Soak & Stay

From *GEOTHERMAL* pools and luxury spa sanctuaries, Victoria's MINERAL-RICH waters and *RESTORATIVE* landscapes offer total *RENEWAL*. Katie Carlin explores the best wellness escapes.

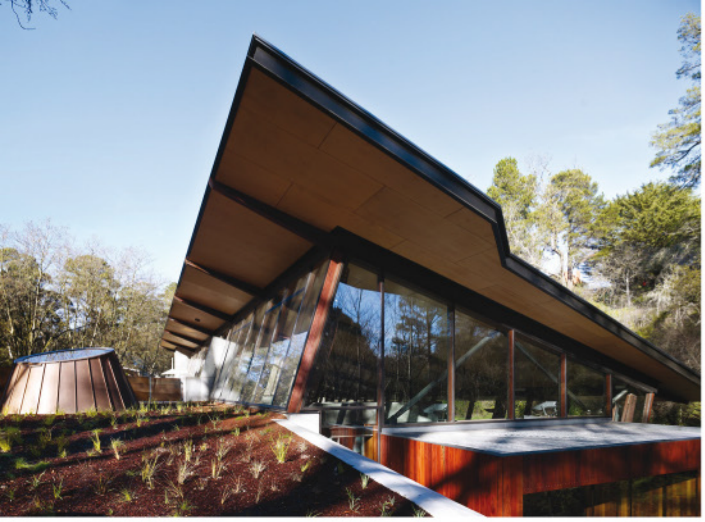
FROM TOP: *Relax at Deep Blue Hotel & Hot Springs in Warrnambool; Alba Thermal Springs & Spa on the Mornington Peninsula; The spa comprises 31 different pools to soak in, as well as a range of other wellness facilities.*

I PASS WAVING COASTAL spear-grass and coast saltbush as I follow the curving path through 15 hectares of thoughtfully curated gardens at the Mornington Peninsula's Alba Thermal Springs & Spa. I hang my robe at the entrance and slip into the first sunken geothermal pool I find – feeling the tension from the 90-minute drive from Melbourne melt away as I watch steam dance across the surface in the late afternoon light. There are 31 pools, a mix of geothermal, cold plunge and botanical, that range in temperature and design, spread over six regions.

I gravitate toward The Hemisphere, with its dry sauna, steam room, cold plunge and dreamy open-air pool called The Hide. But it's Alba's brand-new Sanctuary that really elevates the experience. The five luxurious stand-alone villas and two additional studio rooms opened in June 2025 and feature an indoor fireplace, oversized bathtub with views across the bay, a deck and extensive all-inclusive (minus the cocktails) mini-bar. After dining at Alba's Thyme restaurant, I return to my villa, content to fall asleep early listening to the fire crackle, feeling thoroughly restored.

While Alba is one of the newest in the region, it's certainly not the only place to enjoy a soothing soak. Here are others to book for a wellness weekend.

PHOTOGRAPHY: LISA COHEN PHOTOGRAPHY (THE LAKE HOUSE); VISIT VICTORIA (DEEP BLUE WARRNAMBOOL)



HEPBURN BATHHOUSE & SPA

Nestled in the Daylesford region, Hepburn Bathhouse & Spa has been welcoming guests to its historic bathhouse for 130 years. With a $1.7 million renovation now complete (part of the 21st season of Channel 9's *The Block*), find five new private bathing rooms, an apothecary experience where guests blend a custom body scrub and all-new spa treatment menu. There are three bathing areas: Bathhouse for communal bathing for all ages, adults-only Sanctuary and a private bathing space for a personalised experience – try the skin-softening Mineral Milk Bath.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Hepburn Bathhouse & Spa recently underwent an extensive renovation; Hepburn Bathhouse's magnesium pool; The elegant Atrium villa at Lake House; The main pool at Lake House Daylesford.*

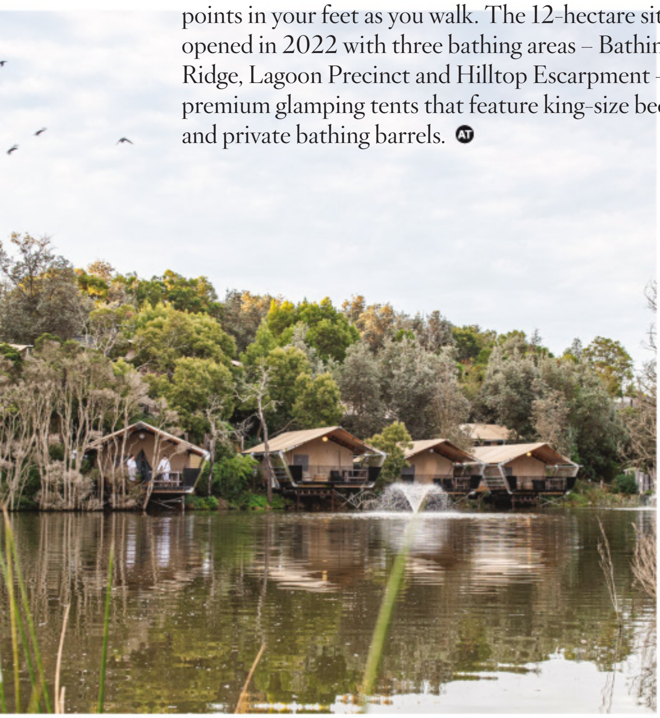
LAKE HOUSE DAYLESFORD

Inciting deep exhales, the spa at Alla Wolf-Tasker's iconic Lake House has long been a beacon of wellness in the region. Tucked into the cottage gardens that wind down to the lake's edge, the spa is beautifully and deliberately cloistered away from guests and diners visiting the celebrated on-site restaurant. From Ayurvedic facials and hydrotherapy that makes use of Daylesford's mineral waters, to cocooning thermal rituals and massage, treatments here promote tranquillity. While a day spa experience is delightful on its own, staying on the property adds a luxe layer to your corporeal renewal, especially if you're in your own private spa villa. →

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Dip into the mineral pool at Lon Retreat & Spa; Bathe in beautiful surroundings at Peninsula Hot Springs; Beechworth's The Benev offers luxury accommodation; Relax fireside at Lon Retreat & Spa; Glamping tents at Metung Hot Springs.*

METUNG HOT SPRINGS

Imagine immersing yourself in a barrel overflowing with geothermal water, all while taking in views of Gippsland Lakes. It's one of several unique bathing experiences available at Metung Hot Springs. There's also a floating sauna and a Reflexology Walk constructed with carefully placed stones designed to stimulate the acupressure points in your feet as you walk. The 12-hectare site opened in 2022 with three bathing areas – Bathing Ridge, Lagoon Precinct and Hilltop Escarpment – and premium glamping tents that feature king-size beds and private bathing barrels. Ⓐ



Four more blissful day spas

LON RETREAT & SPA is an award-winning adults-only retreat on the Bellarine Peninsula. *lonretreat.com.au*

DEEP BLUE HOTEL & HOT SPRINGS features sensory caves and cleansing waterfalls in Warrnambool. *thedeepblue.com.au*

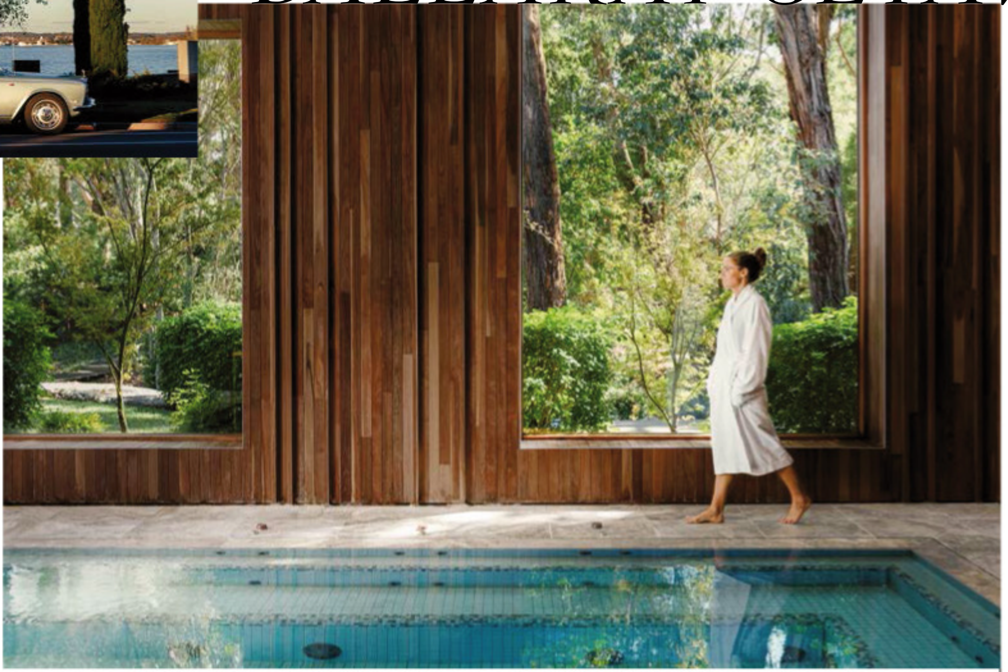
PENINSULA HOT SPRINGS renews with 70 bathing and wellness experiences. *peninsulahotsprings.com*

THE BENEV is an indulgent spa and luxury accommodation in Beechworth. *thebenev.com.au*

PHOTOGRAPHY: EMILY GODFREY (METUNG HOT SPRINGS TENTS ON LAGOON AND BATHS); TOURISM AUSTRALIA/ HARRY POPE/TWO PALMS (PENINSULA HOT SPRINGS); TOURISM AUSTRALIA (BATHROOM AT THE BENEV); NIKOLE RAMSAY (LON RETREAT & SPA)

WIN!

A THREE-NIGHT LUXURY BALLARAT GETAWAY

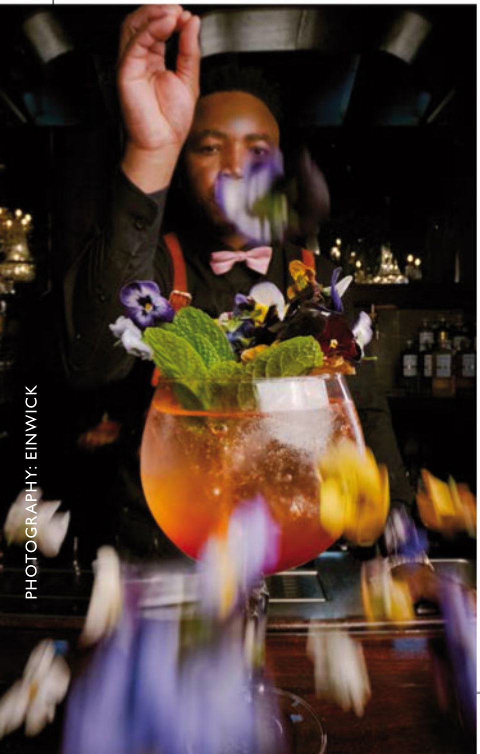


TOTAL PRIZE VALUE:

$5270

What's included in this fabulous prize

- $1600 voucher for a three-night stay at luxe Hotel Vera, including daily breakfast and a dinner at Babae, the hatted onsite restaurant
- $700 voucher for a Signature Spa Journey for two at the acclaimed Ballarat's Sanctuary Day Spa
- $620 voucher for a long lunch at Black Cat Truffles, including a Meredith Wines tasting and transport in a beautiful 1974 Rolls Royce with Silver Mink Tours
- $250 voucher for iconic hatted restaurant Mr Jones
- $200 voucher for Johnny Alloo cafe
- $200 voucher for dinner at speakeasy-style Grainery Lane
- $1200 Webjet voucher for flights and $500 Rentacar voucher



PHOTOGRAPHY: EINWICK

Enter now for your chance to discover a destination that's brilliantly unexpected, where the past, present, culture and creativity collide.

Today, Ballarat is a UNESCO City of Crafts and Folk Art and a thriving regional centre filled with charm, energy and originality. From eclectic architecture to world-class arts and culture, vibrant artisanal offerings to a lively restaurant and bar scene, there's truly something for everyone.

Open your mind to Ballarat – it will create unexpected moments and uplifting experiences for every visitor.

HOW TO ENTER

Tell us in 25 words or less why you'd love to win this Ballarat escape.

IMPORTANT DATES

Entries close: 8 February 2026
Winner chosen: 11 February 2026

TERMS & CONDITIONS

Visit *australiantraveller.com*

SCAN HERE and complete the online entry form online for your chance to **WIN!**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Soak in the mineral-rich water at Metung Hot Springs; Relax at Koho Sauna; Take a flight over Lakes Entrance; Lunch at Metung Hotel; Spot Koalas on Raymond Island.

Wellness by the Water: The Gippsland Lakes

Wellness here doesn't come in a package or a rigid schedule. In the Gippsland Lakes, it's woven into the landscape – steam rising from mineral pools, the slow blink of a koala, the shock of cool water after a sauna. This is a place where the pace shifts naturally, letting you recalibrate without realising it.

METUNG HOT SPRINGS

Metung Hot Springs offers mineral-rich pools overlooking the Gippsland Lakes. Move between heated pools tucked into quiet corners, cedar wine barrels overlooking Lake King, or saunas among fragrant eucalypts. Book a spa treatment and stay overnight in a glamping tent, waking to mist over the lake.

KOHO SAUNA, LAKES ENTRANCE

On the water at Lakes Entrance, Koho Sauna offers a simple, energising experience. A timber-clad, wood-fired sauna floats on the lake, framing the water through wide windows. After the heat, step outside and plunge into the coolness of the lake. The alternating pulse of warmth and chill refreshes the body and clears the mind.

KOALAS ON RAYMOND ISLAND

Raymond Island is home to one of Victoria's largest wild koala populations, best seen along the Koala Trail. Just a two-minute ferry from Paynesville, the walk winds beneath eucalyptus where these slow-moving locals spend their days.

ON THE TRAIL

If your way of unwinding is to keep moving, the Gippsland Lakes Discovery Trail stretches 23 kilometres through Colquhoun State Forest, linking Lakes Entrance with the East Gippsland Rail Trail.

ART AND STORY

Balance time outdoors with quiet reflection. At the Gunaikurnai Cultural Hub, Bush Café and Aboriginal Art Gallery, gain an insight into Gunaikurnai culture through art, and through food at the Bush Cafe. In Lakes Entrance, the Slipway Collective, brings together locally sourced food, drinks and an art gallery, creating a vibrant hub on the water. In Bairnsdale, the East Gippsland Art Gallery curates exhibitions that invite pause and engagement. Together, these experiences remind you that wellness is also about connection – to place, people, and culture.

A NATURAL RESET

In the Gippsland Lakes, wellness isn't measured in hours or checklists. It's found in quiet moments – watching dolphins skim the water, tracing a forest trail, or feeling the heat of a sauna give way to a cool plunge. East Gippsland invites you to slow down, reconnect with nature, and leave behind the noise of daily life.

To plan your stay in Gippsland, see visitgippsland.com.au

SLOW CHARMS

Once a *SERVICE TOWN* for gold miners, Healesville has evolved into a *DESTINATION* brimming with *CHARACTER*.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *Healesvillas boast sweeping mountain views; Inside one of the cosy villas; Wine bar No.7 Healesville; Puffing Billy Railway; No.7 offers small plates and tasting menus centred on seasonal produce.*

WORDS: KELLIE FLOYD. PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA (RAILWAY); BEN FRAZER (NO.7)

IF YOU TRACE YOUR FINGER to the heart of the Yarra Valley on a map, you'll land on Healesville – a charming little town framed by towering gums and rolling hills. Its main street is lined with cosy cafes, a bookshop, silversmiths, boutiques and a providore stacked with artisan breads and cured meats. In other words, all the essentials for a leisurely weekend. Just beyond the shops, parklands invite picnics, bush trails suggest a wander, along with an old tourist railway, distilleries and award-winning vineyards. Originally a service centre for the goldfields, the railway soon brought visitors seeking fresh mountain air. Today, it's the kind of place that rewards a slow stroll.

STAY A WHILE

If sweeping mountain views are part of your accommodation prerequisite, Healesvillas are two architecturally designed villas sleeping six guests, complete with landscaped al fresco areas and a fire pit. Wander into town to visit Cheesemonger Sophie to help craft the perfect platter, and Barrique Wine Store for a local red, before returning to soak up the views.

PLATES WORTH THE PAUSE

For breakfast, head to My Little Kitchen Cafe, a cheerful spot on the main street known for its strong coffee and warm hospitality. Herd is a low-lit spot with serious style, serving up modern comfort food, or to sit beside wine barrels and underneath chandeliers head to No. 7 Healesville, a wine bar and restaurant in a converted warehouse. →

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *Boutique winery Boat O'Craigo; Healesville Sanctuary is a haven for native wildlife; Enjoy a cocktail at renowned Four Pillars Gin Distillery; The distillery runs tastings and masterclasses.*

SIP, SWIRL, REPEAT

Take a tour or sip your way through a tasting paddle at one of Australia's most famous gin distilleries, Four Pillars Gin. If visiting a boutique winery is on the list, Boat O'Craigo wines has sweeping views over the vineyards to the hills beyond. The newest addition to the local drinking scene, Zoncello Yarra Valley serves a must-try Limoncello Spritz.

BOUTIQUES WITH A TWIST

If you're after a one-of-a-kind piece of jewellery, Silvermist Studio designs beautifully unique pieces. Lifestyle store Morris et al is filled with women's fashion and homewares, and because everyone deserves a good book, Verso Books is a cosy independent bookshop with carefully chosen titles.

NOT TO MISS MOMENTS

Head to Healesville Sanctuary to get up close to some of Australia's wildlife. If the weather is on your side, pack a picnic and head to Maroondah Reservoir Park to climb the steep dam wall, where kids and adults alike can't resist testing out the booming echo. And if you feel like stepping back in time, board a vintage train at the Yarra Valley Railway.

PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA (KANGAROO AT HEALESVILLE SANCTUARY); ROB BLACKBURN (BOAT O'CRAIGO); LVDI (FOUR PILLARS)

Hepburn
Bathhouse & Spa
0.95M

HEPBURN BATHHOUSE & SPA

Experience the Hepburn Bathhouse & Spa historic wellness sanctuary like never before. Step into this award-winning bathhouse and spa and treat yourself to all-new offerings. A lush escape offing Private, Sanctuary and Bathhouse Mineral Bathing,

The waters you bathe in at Hepburn Bathhouse & Spa come straight from the source, mineral-rich springs that have flowed through the region for thousands of years. These springs have long been recognised for their natural healing qualities. The Dja Dja Wurrung people, Traditional Owners of this land, were the first to use the waters for rest and healing.

Today, these same waters are used to support recovery, relaxation, and overall wellbeing. Naturally high in minerals like magnesium, calcium, silica and sulphur, they can help ease muscle tension, support skin health, and offer a moment of calm. When you step into the water, you're connecting with a long tradition of care, grounded in nature and shaped by history.

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The birth *of* surf

Torquay's *ICONIC* Bells Beach is considered one of the best surf BEACHES in the *WORLD*. Craig Tansley EXPLORES how it came to *DEFINE* Aussie surf culture.

FROM LEFT: *Surfers stand on the shore at Bells Beach, where the country's biggest surfing competition is held each year; Surfers take advantage of the huge swells from the Great Southern Ocean at Bells Beach.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES/FILEDIMAGE (SURFERS WAITING ON BEACH); TOURISM AUSTRALIA (DETAIL); TOURISM AUSTRALIA/CAMERON MURRAY (BELLS BEACH)

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL SURFING MUSEUM
Entry

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Surfers out at Bells Beach, Victoria's most famous beach; The Australian National Surfing Museum in Torquay; The museum holds surfing memorabilia, including a room dedicated to the history of boards; The varied displays celebrate the Bells Beach competition, surfing legends and Aussie surf culture; The beach near Torquay is Australia's answer to Hawai'i's Pipeline.*

IT'D BE EASY TO THINK Australian surf culture was born around the right-hand point breaks of the Gold Coast and Byron Bay. These regions seem the epitome of how the world views Aussie surfers – bronzed (or burnt), languishing in warm water and sunshine. The reality is a lot different.

True Aussie surf culture was born on the chilly waves of Victoria's winters, when huge swells from the Great Southern Ocean hit cliff-lined beaches along the Great Ocean Road. These beaches were the ultimate proving ground – surfers from all over Australia arrived in panel vans and VWs to do battle with the biggest waves they could find.

There are surf breaks all along this very picturesque coast – but those around Torquay were most revered. The ultimate test of a surfer's ability – and durability – however, was Bells Beach: Australia's answer to Hawai'i's Pipeline. Just beyond, the breaks at Jan Juc and Winkipop beckoned.

Torquay became surfing's Silicon Valley: HQ for the entire Australian surf culture revolution. Four young locals worked out of their backyards in Torquay to create two of the world's biggest surf labels – Rip Curl and Quiksilver, which soon became the region's biggest employers.

Rip Curl started sponsoring the Bells Beach Pro in 1973 – and have done ever since. It's been going since 1962 – making it the world's longest continually run surfing contest. Held every Easter, it's part of the world surfing tour. Spectators line its 30-metre-high cliffs to watch the world's best take on enormous waves – it's the ultimate coliseum for the sport and has inspired generations of Aussie surfers to join the list of heroes whose names are on its iconic bell.

Just behind Torquay's main drag, you can see all that history on display at the world's best surf museum – the Australian National Surfing Museum. Here you can take your time absorbing the 100-year-or-so history of Australian surfing and check out the 150-strong surfboard collection. But classic Aussie surf culture can be observed in everyday life all over the Great Ocean Road and Torquay. Surfing dictates life here; no work is done until the big swells have come and gone. Just being here provides a window into 60-odd years of rebellion against convention; for no-one likes nine-to-five living on the Great Ocean Road.

There's less panel vans and VW Beetles these days, but surf culture still rules life. Surfers run this coast; you're better off keeping out of their way when they're running down past you to face the biggest swells – then hear them swap stories at cafes, restaurants and bars all around you. AT

PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM AUSTRALIA (AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL SURFING MUSEUM); VISIT VICTORIA/WILLIAM WATT (SURFING AT BELLS BEACH X2)

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Great Ocean Road

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *The Woodlands is set on a large bushland property; Inside the 1970s log cabin; Miss Northcotts Garden is a charming garden store with tea room.*

PUMP AND PEDAL

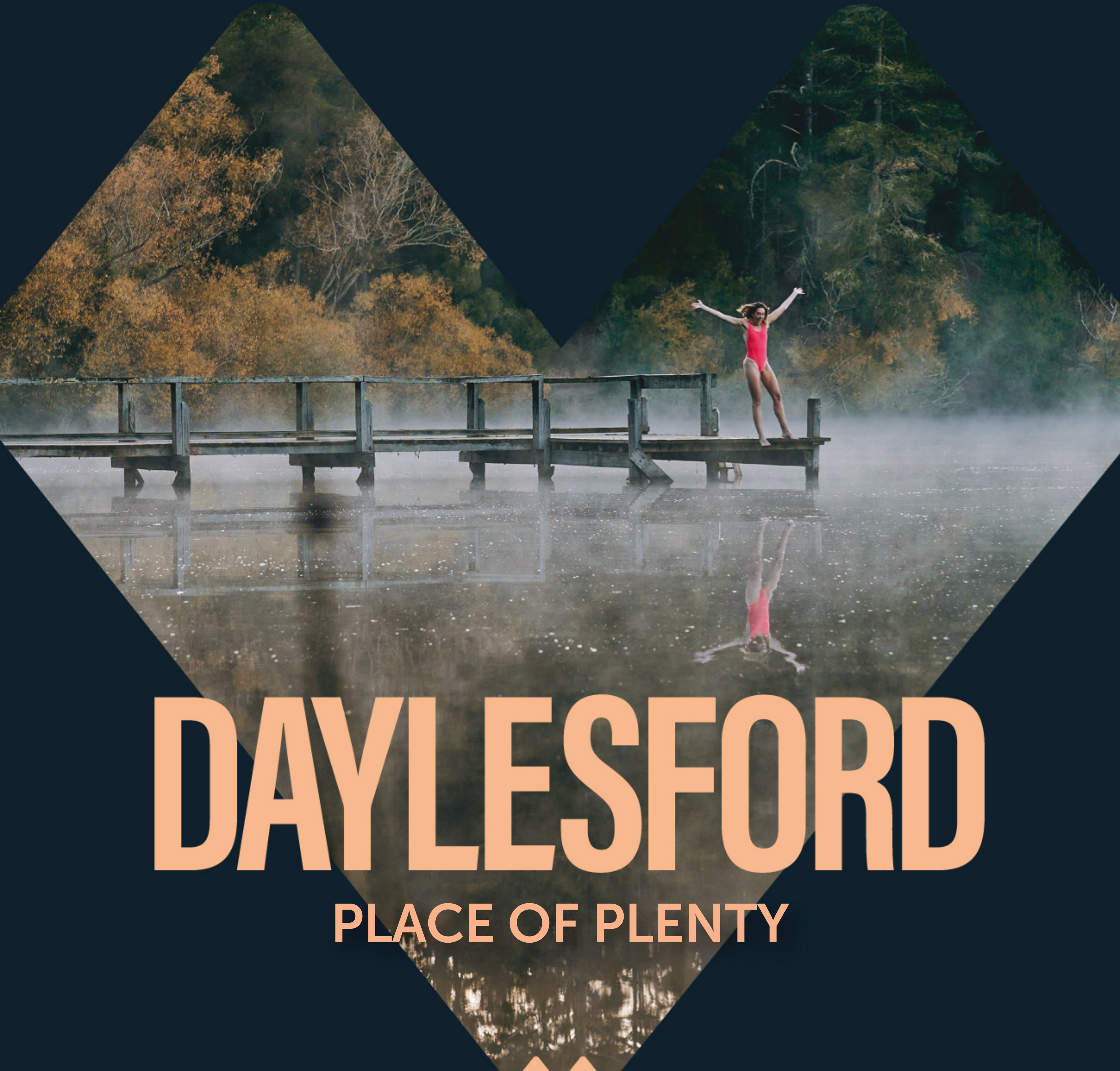
A town charmingly paused in *TIME* has become a *HOT* mountain BIKING destination, finds Craig Tansley.

THERE'S A FOREST RESERVE full of eucalyptus and pines surrounding town – when you combine all the greenery with a main street of grand old buildings still standing from the Victorian Gold Rush, Creswick looks more period movie set than a 21st-century town. This entire region of Victoria – the Central Goldfields – is as pretty-as-a-picture, but there's something extra-special about Creswick. I used to live 30 minutes north; I'd drive in some evenings to cruise its main street at dusk, and pretend I was travelling back in time.

It was sleepy back then, but that's changed. Where I used to walk through its forest, now I'm hurtling down the state's best new mountain bike trails. There's a 60-kilometre network of mountain bike trails – dubbed Djuwang Baring – which make Creswick the state's hottest new mountain biking destination. Victoria has a habit of turning quiet country towns into mountain biking hotspots. I was there in the mid-2000s when the tiny Otways village of Forrest embarked on an ambitious plan to save itself (after the death of its timber cutting industry) courtesy of some of the world's best mountain bike trails. A screaming success it proved to be, and soon mountain bike trails began popping up all over Victoria. →

Welcome to my GARDEN

PHOTOGRAPHY: VANESSA SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY (THE WOODLANDS); VISIT VICTORIA (MISS NORTHCOTT'S GARDEN)



DAYLESFORD

PLACE OF PLENTY

VICTORIA'S HEARTLAND

DISCOVER MORE

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: *The Woodlands is a short drive from Creswick; This historic town has become a mountain biking hotspot; The town centre is dotted with historic buildings; Le Peche Gourmand makes for the perfect pitstop for carb and sugar-loading.*

A traveller's checklist

Staying there

RACV GOLDFIELDS RESORT is a contemporary stay with a restaurant, swimming pool and golf course. *racv.com.au*

THE WOODLANDS in nearby Lal Lal comprises a chic log cabin set on a 16-hectare property abundant in native wildlife. *thewoodlandslallal.com*

Eating there

The menu at **ODESSA AT LEAVER'S HOTEL** includes some Thai-inspired fare. *odessa-at-leavers.com*

Fuel up for your ride on baguettes and pastries from French patisserie **LE PECHE GOURMAND**. *lepechegourmand.com.au*

THE FARMERS ARMS has been a much-loved local institution since 1857. *farmersarmscreswick.com*

Playing there

CRESWICK STATE FOREST has a variety of hiking trails, including a section of the 210-kilometre-long Goldfields Track. *parks.vic.gov.au*

MISS NORTHCOTTS GARDEN is a quaint garden store with tea room. *instagram.com/missnorthcottsgarden*

I'm no expert, so I like that a lot of Creswick's trails are as scenic as they are challenging. I prefer intermediate trails, such as Down Martuk, with its flowing berms and a view round every corner. Everyone from outright beginners to experts can be happy here. There's trails that take me down technical rock sections with plenty of bumps. But there's enough on offer to appeal to day-trippers, as much as hard-core mountain-bikers.

I love that the trails empty onto that grand old main street. There's bars still standing from the Gold Rush of the 1850s I can refuel at. Like the award-winning Farmers Arms, not to be confused with the pub sharing its name in Daylesford. It's stood since 1857. And The American Creswick built two years later, or Odessa Wine Bar, part of Leaver's Hotel in an 1856-built former gold exchange bank. Creswick is also full of great cafes and restaurants, many of them set in the same old buildings that have stood for 170 years.

So whether you're here for the rush of the trails or the calm of town life, Creswick provides. AT

OLD GOLD BANK 1860

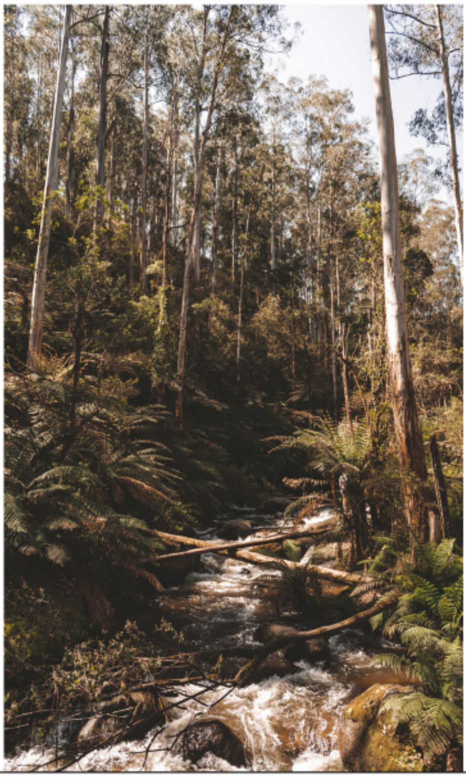
PHOTOGRAPHY: VANESSA SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY(THE WOODLANDS); VISIT VICTORIA (OLD GOLD BANK)

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Stroll across the Noojee Trestle Bridge; Catch a fish at the Apline Trout Farm; Walk the loop at Tooroongo Falls; Explore the Toorongo and Amphitheatre Falls Loop Walk

Waterfalls, Forest Trails & Fireside Nights: Noojee Calls

This pocket-sized mountain town in West Gippsland trades in cool air, wild beauty and warm welcomes – the perfect weekend antidote to city life.

Cradled in the cool green heart of West Gippsland, Noojee is a place where nature and nostalgia meet. Here, the air is fragrant with damp earth and eucalypt, waterfalls tumble through fern gullies, and the timber bones of a century-old trestle bridge still stand proud. Just 90 minutes from Melbourne, Noojee offers big rewards for those who linger – think trout fresh from the stream, slow evenings by a crackling fire, and a night sky so clear you'll lose count of the stars.



DO

Start with the Noojee Trestle Bridge. Built in 1919, this 102-metre-long, 21-metre-high timber structure is the tallest of its kind in Victoria. Stroll across for epic views of a forest seemingly untouched by time.

Nearby, the Toorongo and Amphitheatre Falls Loop Walk rewards with two stunning cascades along an easy 2.2-kilometre track, where rushing water and birdsong provide the soundtrack. Catch your lunch at the Alpine Trout Farm, where you can hook rainbow trout or salmon, cleaned and packed to go.

For a taste of history, visit the Noojee Railway Station Precinct, telling stories of the town's timber and rail past.

Cyclists and walkers will love the Rokeby to Neerim Rail Trail, winding through farmland and forest. Pause at Apex Lookout for sweeping views of the surrounding hills.

EAT

For hearty pub fare, the Noojee Hotel serves generous plates on a sunny deck or by the fire. The Toolshed Bar, Bistro & Cabins pairs rustic charm with Gippsland produce–led dishes and a strong wine list.

STAY

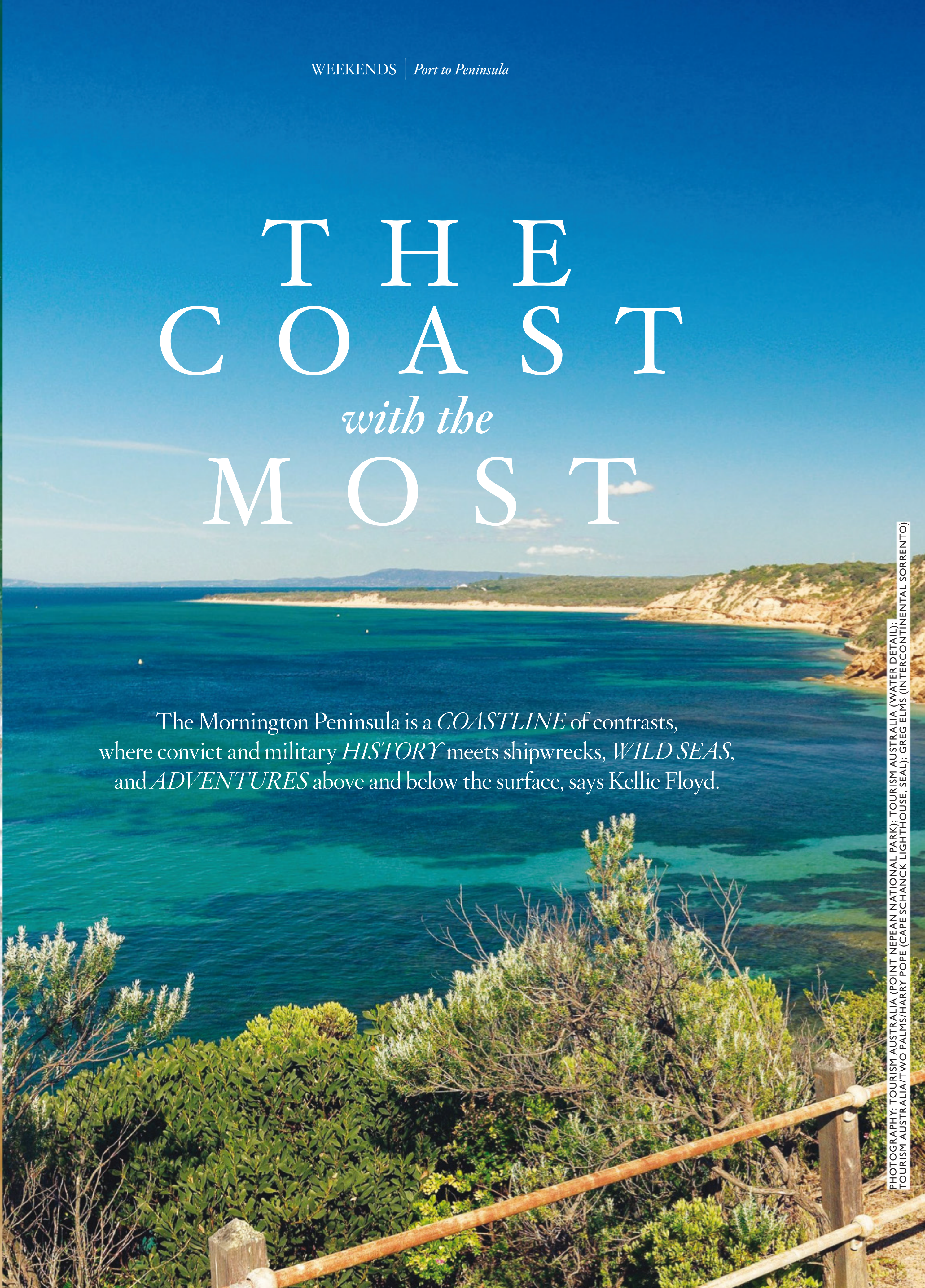
Indulge in plush comfort at Rosemont House Luxury B&B with gourmet breakfasts included. Toorongo Valley Estate sits amid rolling farmland for a nature-lovers escape, or The Toolshed Cabins put you steps away from dinner and drinks.

ALPINE TROU
FARM

The Verdict

Noojee is a place to breathe deep and savour simple pleasures. Walk among century-old trees, fish for your lunch, and toast the day's adventures by a roaring fire. West Gippsland magic, bottled in a weekend.

To plan your stay in Gippsland, see visitgippsland.com.au

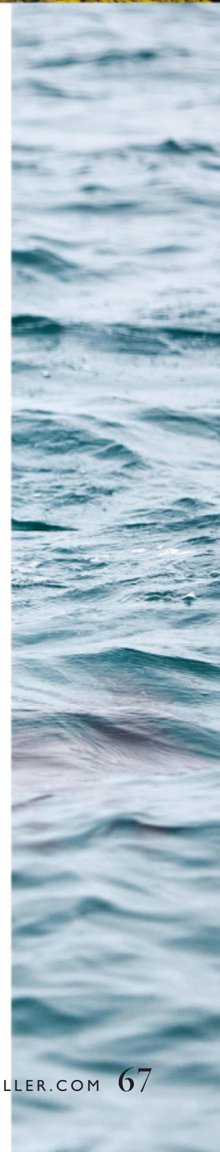


THE COAST *with the* MOST

The Mornington Peninsula is a *COASTLINE* of contrasts, where convict and military *HISTORY* meets shipwrecks, *WILD SEAS*, and *ADVENTURES* above and below the surface, says Kellie Floyd.

PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM AUSTRALIA (POINT NEPEAN NATIONAL PARK); TOURISM AUSTRALIA (WATER DETAIL); TOURISM AUSTRALIA/TWO PALMS/HARRY POPE (CAPE SCHANCK LIGHTHOUSE, SEAL); GREG ELMS (INTERCONTINENTAL SORRENTO)

CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: *Port Nepean National Park; Poolside at InterContinental Sorrento; Luxury interiors at the historic hotel; A seal swimming in Port Phillip Bay; Cape Schanck Lighthouse.*



THE MORNINGTON PENINSULA can be the kind of place where salt-tangled hair feels like a badge of honour – proof you've been somewhere wild, raw and real. Peel back the layers and you'll discover stories that anchor this region to something other than its famed food and wine.

This land is the traditional Sea Country of the Bunurong/Boon Wurrung people. Long before grapevines were planted and artisanal goods were crafted, the Bunurong Traditional Owners lived in deep connection with the land and sea. Today, places such as Mushroom Reef Marine Sanctuary echo that tradition, with families exploring its rockpools in search of colourful sea stars and crabs at low tide and learning how these fragile ecosystems have been cared for across countless generations.

A visit to Point Nepean National Park feels like stepping back through time. The fort, built in 1882, protected the narrow entrance to Port Phillip Bay until the end of the Second World War. It was here that the first Allied shot of the First World War was fired – at a German cargo ship trying to escape just hours after war was declared. Nearby, the old Quarantine Station, one of Australia's first permanent quarantine facilities, established in 1852, still stands. Walking through the hospital and disinfecting complex evokes stories of those who arrived from faraway shores.

Not far from here is a story of survival that inspired the Aussie phrase 'you've got Buckley's chance'. In 1803, escaped convict William Buckley vanished into the bush near what's now Sorrento. Everyone thought he had no hope of surviving, but he reappeared 32 years later, having lived with local Aboriginal people.

Even the waters here hold history. The infamous stretch known as The Rip, just three kilometres wide at the entrance of Port Phillip Bay, is among the most treacherous waterways. Countless ships were lost here in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and in 1967, Australia's own Prime Minister Harold Holt disappeared while swimming off the coast, never to be found.

But for all its danger, the sea here also holds extraordinary beauty. Dolphins are often seen near Sorrento's cliffs, while below the surface, seagrass meadows and rocky reefs teem with life. Marine tours offer a viewing to this underwater wonderland, while back on terra firma, walking trails lead along beaches, through coastal scrub, and over rock pools.

And if you think you'll forget about the Mornington Peninsula once you've left? You've got Buckley's chance. AT

A traveller's checklist

Staying there

POINT NEPEAN DISCOVERY TENTS is immersive glamping beside the historic Quarantine Station (*parks.vic.gov.au*). Or upgrade to luxury at the 1875-built **INTERCONTINENTAL SORRENTO** (*sorrento.intercontinental.com*).

Playing there

BAYPLAY ADVENTURE TOURS offer eco-adventures from snorkelling with sea dragons to kayaking with dolphins and cycling Point Nepean. *bayplay.com.au*

CAPE SCHANCK LIGHTHOUSE is fascinating to explore on a guided tour, which takes you into the lighthouse and keeper's cottage. *parks.vic.gov.au*

Eating there

PORTSEA HOTEL is a beautifully restored 1876 Tudor-style pub right on the beach, serving seasonal local fare. *portseahotel.com.au*

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Limestone sculptures and baroque stalactites and stalagmites impress as you explore the caves; You'll need to book a guided tour to see the caves; Buchan Caves are a must-visit attraction in Gippsland.*

The BEAUTY BENEATH

Mythical, *HISTORICAL* and most of all, spectacularly beautiful, *BUCHAN CAVES* demands you TAKE your time (and a tour), reveals Michael Turtle.

IN THE POOLS OF WATER, so still they could be mirrors, the reflections of the stalactites make these limestone towers seem even taller. Almost 400 million years ago, an underground river carved through the rock to create the Buchan Caves. Now, artworks created by dripping water adorn these subterranean galleries: stalactites hanging from the ceiling, pillars connecting some to the ground, even curtain-like wave formations clinging to the stone.

"This is called the Fairy Cave because it's full of fairy dust," a guide tells visitors as they enter a cavern glittering with "calcite that's solidified into thousands of tiny little diamond shapes". Buchan Caves is Victoria's largest cave system, but Fairy Cave is a highlight and, along with nearby Royal Cave, is accessible only by tour. Naturally cold, naturally dark, these caverns deep below the surface light up as the local experts tell their stories.

Among the hundreds of caves, some can be easily accessed from the surface. For instance, a casual stroll along the FJ Wilson Interpreted Walk, as kangaroos watch on from beneath acacia trees, leads into the 400-metre-long Federal Cave and its natural steps of white limestone. A slightly longer track, the Granite Pools Walk heads through soaring forest down into moss-covered gullies where the calls of lyrebirds trill through the leaves. →

PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM AUSTRALIA (COUPLE WALKING IN CAVE, HILLSIDE); BEN SAVAGE (THREE WOMEN IN CAVE)

ONLINE

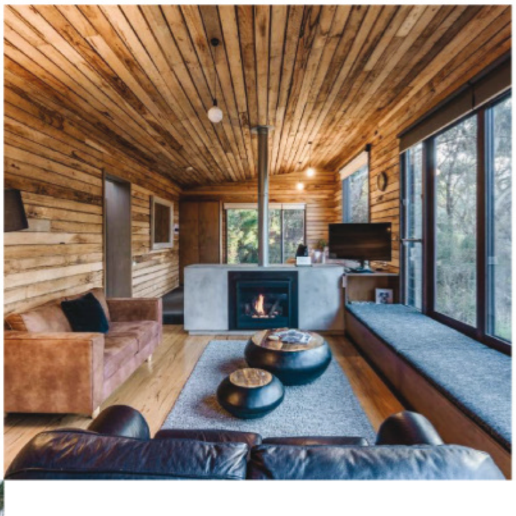
For bush cabin cool, an old BATHHOUSE with a new look, top *TOWNS*, and an off-the-radar wildlife haven, Victoria awaits. Discover it ALL at *australiantraveller.com*

Hepburn Bathhouse renewed

We slip into the reviving, spring-fed mineral waters at the newly revamped Hepburn Bathhouse & Spa to test its updated spaces. Established in 1895, Australia's oldest spa has emerged from its own self-care ritual with beautifully re-styled private mineral baths, renovated changerooms and new experiences to help you unwind.

WE'RE CALLING IT – THE MURRAY IS THE KAKADU OF THE SOUTH

Off the well-trampled track are pockets of extraordinary and wild beauty. One such place is Victoria's Gunbower Forest, perched on the banks of the Murray River. This eco-diverse wetland rambles for 20,000 staggering hectares, harbouring all manner of native fauna and birdlife. Walk or paddle through the forest to take it all in – and at this southern-state Kakadu, you don't have to be on croc-watch.



VICTORIA'S TOP TOWNS HAVE BEEN CROWNED

We have the scoop on which gorgeous Victorian towns have taken out the gongs for Top Tourism Town, Top Small Tourism Town and Top Tiny Tourism Town in this year's awards. Head online at *australiantraveller.com* to discover the winning spots. Here's a hint – they span the diverse regions of the state, from coastline to the alpine area.

Found: the Grampians' cutest cabins for hideaway vibes

Who doesn't love a log cabin? Add some architectural cred, a private outdoor spa and quiet bush surroundings and you'll find DULC's five stays are an off-grid utopia, and all only a stone's throw from Halls Gap.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: CHLOE SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY (TOP TOWNS)

BUCHAN
CAVES HOTEL
CARLTON
DRAUGHT

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *The Buchan Caves Hotel was rebuilt after burning down in 2014; Visit the caves for the day or stay onsite in the campground or at the self-contained Caves House; There are two main caves, Fairy Cave and Royal Cave.*

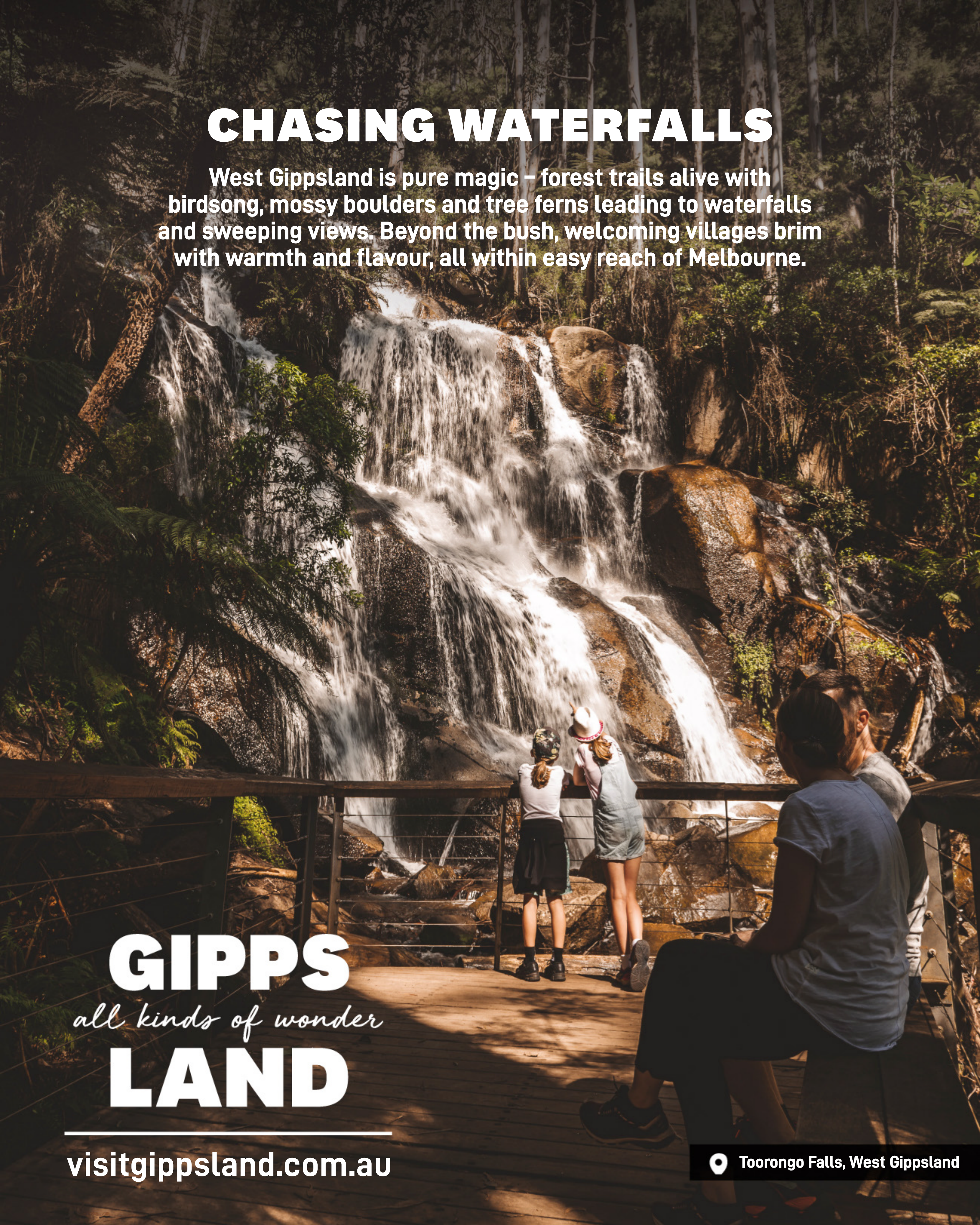
Fairy Cave 200 M ↑

Among the geology and the nature are millennia of history. This part of East Gippsland connects the high country to the coast and was long a place of refuge for the local Gunaikurnai people on seasonal migrations to the mountains. Archaeological studies show humans lived here up to 18,000 years ago, with artefacts such as small stone tools found around the site. But not too far into the caverns – oh no! The Gunaikurnai didn't dare venture deep into the dark at Buchan Caves, telling stories they were inhabited by gnome-like nyols (small grey-skinned creatures that could steal memories).

By the early 1900s, more people had started to hear about these incredible caves and so the Moon family set up home at the site and started to run tours below ground for intrepid visitors. More than a century later, their historic residence is available as accommodation, with the three-bedroom house sleeping up to eight people and now equipped with modern amenities the Moons could only have dreamt of.

But whether you stay overnight or just spend the day here, it's worth taking your time to explore more than just the main caves, to get a deeper understanding of one of Victoria's fascinating geological attractions. AT

PHOTOGRAPHY: JESS SHAPIRO (PUB, FAIRY CAVE SIGN); BEN SAVAGE (ENTERING CAVE)



CHASING WATERFALLS

West Gippsland is pure magic – forest trails alive with birdsong, mossy boulders and tree ferns leading to waterfalls and sweeping views. Beyond the bush, welcoming villages brim with warmth and flavour, all within easy reach of Melbourne.

GIPPS
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LAND

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Toorongo Falls, West Gippsland

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FROM TOP: *The colours of Lake Tyrrell blend into the sky; Pink Lake, also known as Loch Lel, located near Dimboola in the Grampians; You can camp at Lake Lascelles.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM AUSTRALIA (PINK LAKE DIMBOOLA); VISIT VIC/ANNE MORELY (LAKE TYRRELL DETAIL)

WIMMERA Mallee Lakescapes

From *PINK* salt landscapes to OASES fringed by forests of red gums, the *LAKES* of this RURAL region are astounding, writes Craig Tansley.

YOU'RE GOING TO FIND PEACE and quiet when you take a road trip through the lakes of the Wimmera Mallee region. Whether it's mirror-like pink salt lakes that look like an inland sea, or lakes fringed by forests of red gums that showcase the Victoria's arid beauty, there's a lake for you out here somewhere.

LAKE TYRRELL

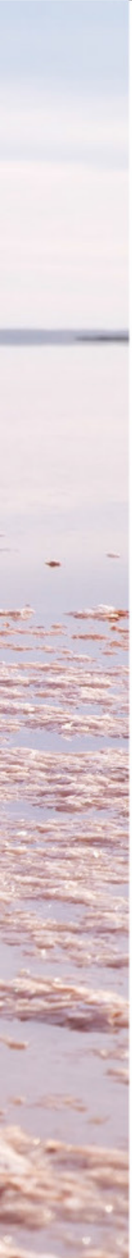
Located in the dead heart of the Mallee, Victoria's largest salt lake, Lake Tyrrell, is a landscape photographer's dream – especially at sunrise and sunset when the pink salt flats look like a gigantic mirror. It's easy to camp or park a caravan nearby, too, though the tiny town of Sea Lake is just south (with accommodation). In winter, shallow water covers the salt, creating surreal reflections of the sky.

NHILL LAKE

There's a permanent water source here, so there's always plenty of water for water skiing, swimming and fishing (the trout and redfin fishing here is legendary). Located beside the pretty heritage town of Nhill with its main street of historic buildings, there's options for eating and drinking right next door. There's also a barbecue area with plenty of shady picnic spots and a boardwalk for walking around the lake.

LAKE BRINGALBERT

Located south-west of the pretty Mallee town of Kaniva, Lake Bringalbert epitomises the best of 'outback' Victoria. It's ringed by →



red gums and red mallee and feels completely hidden from the world – you'll barely ever see another person. There's basic camping on its foreshore and Kaniva offers more accommodation options. It's the perfect lake for swimming, kayaking and skiing, and the stars at night come without even a hint of city glow.

LAKE HINDMARSH

If you're a bird fan, you'll love Lake Hindmarsh. Located north of Dimboola, Victoria's largest natural freshwater lake is like an inland sea full of pelicans, swans and numerous species of ducks – but it also teems with everything from spoonbills to parrots. Sunsets here will blow your mind – the lake is a mirror for the pinks and golds you'll see on the horizon. There's free camping spots along the foreshore if you'd like to really contemplate the magic of the lake.

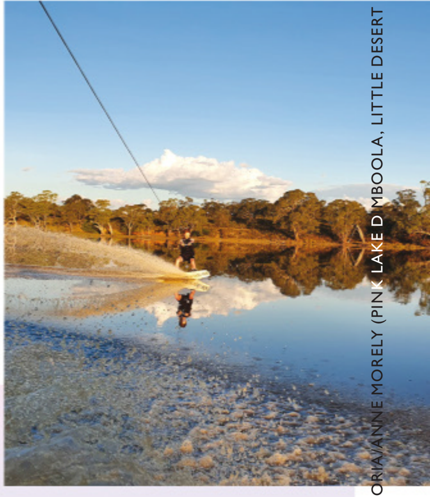
PINK LAKE

Also known as Loch Lel, the summer months offer up some seriously vivid pink water colour at this lake north of Dimboola. The pink varies throughout the year, but is best after rain (hence why summer is the time to visit). There's plenty of birds, including wedge-tailed eagles, but you're as likely to spot big lace monitors, kangaroos and echidnas. Nearby, check out the uber-cute heritage town of Dimboola and its eclectic shops, and Little Desert National Park, full of walking trails through mallee heathland.

LAKE LASCELLES

On a hot summer's day, there's nowhere better for a cooling dip, kayak or boat ride. You can camp by the lake, or at powered caravan sites – or the pretty town of Hopetoun offers numerous accommodation options a short walk away. At night you'll see the lights of Hopetoun reflect off the lake. Fish for yellow belly, redfin or catfish, or try water-skiing. There's also a great walking trail around the lake, where there's more birds than you can count.

FROM TOP: *Pretty Lake Lascelles is not far from Hopetoun; Getting up close to the salty surface of Lake Tyrrell; Lake Bringalbert is a great spot for aquatic adventures; The Pink Lake near Dimboola is most vivid after rain.*



PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA/ANNE MORELY (PINK LAKE DIMBOOLA, LITTLE DESERT NATIONAL PARK)

DIMBOOLA JEPARIT NHILL RAINBOW

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Budj Bim Cultural Landscape is on Gunditjmara Country; A Smoking Ceremony at Tower Hill; Black swans at Tae Rak (Lake Condah); The kooyang (eel) tank at Tae Rak; Visit the state-of-the-art aquaculture centre at the lake; First Peoples-led organisation Worn Gundidj leads organised cultural tours through Tower Hill Reserve.*

ANCIENT FOOTSTEPS

From *ANCIENT* aquaculture systems to *SACRED* rock art shelters, Victoria's First Peoples cultural experiences offer a powerful CONNECTION to one of the world's oldest living cultures – where every site, story and smoking *CEREMONY* invites a deeper understanding of the LAND beneath your feet.

WORDS **ANGELA SAURINE**

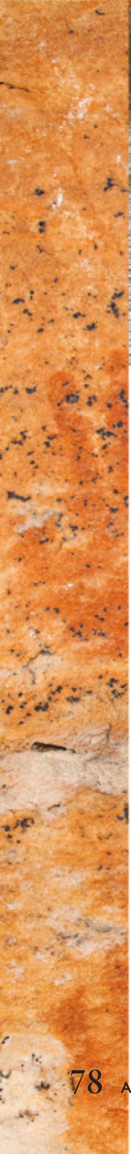
VICTORIA'S SWEEPING LANDSCAPES hold stories far older than any road map can trace – stories etched into stone, sung through generations and woven into every bend of river and rise of hill. From the lava flows of Budj Bim to the ancient middens of Moyjil/Point Ritchie and the volcanic crater of Tower Hill, the state is home to some of the most significant First Peoples cultural sites in Australia. These places, along with other immersive experiences, offer not only a window into a 60,000-year legacy, but a profound way of understanding Country itself. As more travellers seek connection over checklists, guided tours by Traditional Owners offer respectful, unforgettable insights into a living culture that continues to shape the land and the people who walk it.

BUDJ BIM CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Venture beyond the surf and sand of the Great Ocean Road to discover a deeper story etched into the volcanic landscape. At Budj Bim, ancient aquaculture channels built by the Gunditjmara people to trap, store and harvest kooyang (short-finned eel) reveal one of the world's oldest living cultures. While you're in the area, head over to the state-of-the-art Tae Rak Aquaculture Centre, where you can observe the eels in a special tank, wander the shores of Tae Rak (Lake Condah), and enjoy a bite at the Bush Tucker Cafe. Also nearby is Tower Hill, a dormant volcano reborn as a wildlife reserve, offering trails through bushland teeming with emus and koalas. *budjbim.com.au* →

PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Guests are guided through Kooyoora State Park on the Dumawul walking tour; Knowledge of the Dja Dja Wurrung is shared on the trail (above and right); Exploring Nagambie with Taungurung leaders; Cruising the Murray with Kingfisher Cruises.*



DUMAWUL KOOYOORA WALKING TOUR

Step into a timeless landscape with Dumawul's guided tour through Kooyoora State Park, around an hour's drive west of Bendigo in north-central Victoria. Led by Djaara guides, this immersive half-day journey breathes life into Country, weaving together stories, bush tucker and ancient rock art. Known to the Dja Dja Wurrung people as Guyura – the 'mountain of light' – this dramatic granite range is rich with cultural and spiritual significance. The adventure begins with a meet-up at the Bridgewater Hotel on the banks of the Loddon River, before guests are welcomed onto Country with a traditional Smoking Ceremony – a powerful ritual that honours ancestors and cleanses those who walk the land. From there, it's a gentle wander through rugged outcrops and open bushland, with sweeping vistas unfolding at every turn. Along the way, guides share their knowledge of how the Dja Dja Wurrung peoples have cared for and adapted with this land for generations, offering a rare and moving window into an ancient way of life that continues to thrive today. *dumawul.com.au*

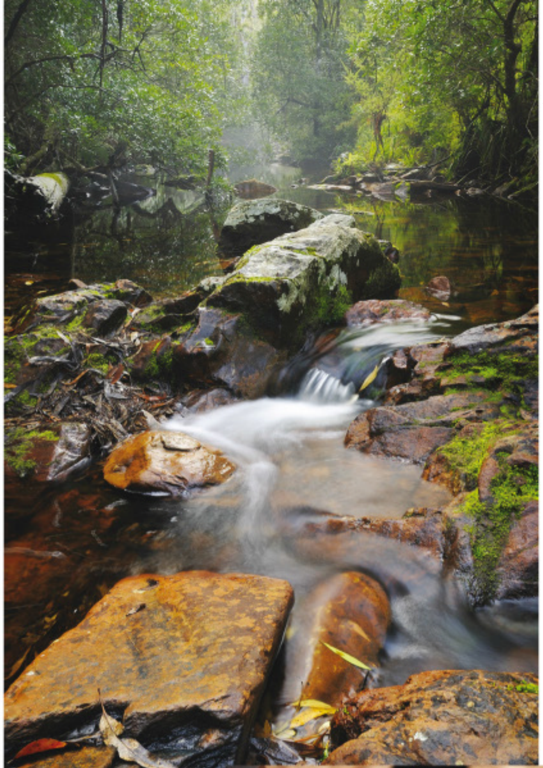
KINGFISHER CRUISES

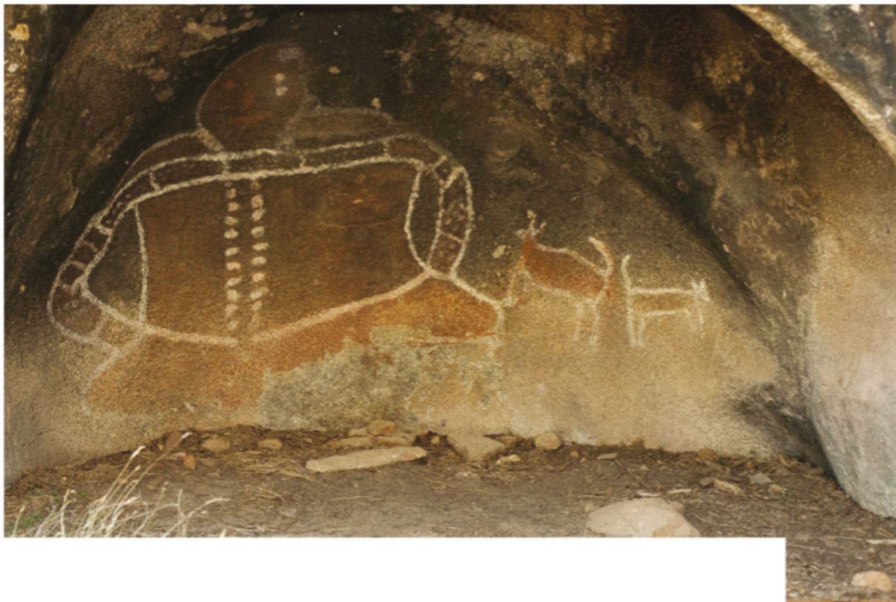
Glide quietly through the Barmah-Millewa forest – the nation's largest river red gum ecosystem – on a scenic journey along the Murray River and into the Barmah Lakes with Kingfisher Cruises. Led by passionate guides who share stories of the cultural significance of this ancient landscape, these cruises reveal the stories, totems and traditional knowledge of the Yorta Yorta people. As you navigate narrow waterways and spot native birds, you'll gain a richer understanding of how First Peoples have lived in harmony with this floodplain for tens of thousands of years. It's a gentle, immersive experience that leaves a lasting impression – one where every bend in the river carries echoes of culture, connection and Country. *dharnyacentre.com.au*

WAWA BIIK

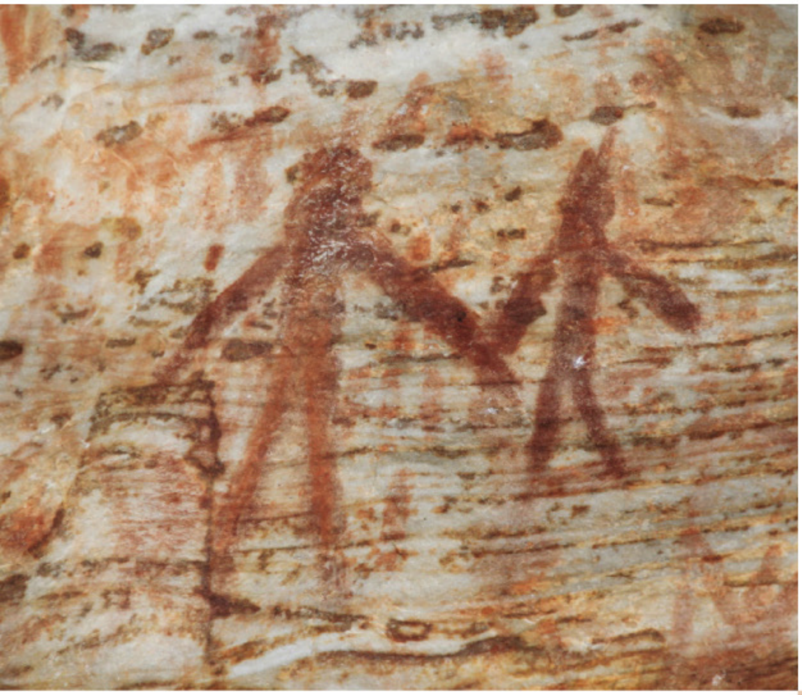
Translating to 'hello, Country' in the language of the First Nations People and Custodians of the rivers and mountains of Taungurung Country in Central Victoria, wawa biik guides a range of authentic and deeply immersive experiences. Leaving from either Nagambie or Euroa, the tours are woven with ancient stories of the Taungurung, telling how a sustained connection and responsibility ensures the continued health of biik – benefitting the people, animals and plants that live in and around the Goulburn River. During the wawa Nagambie experience, guests participate in a Welcome Smoking Ceremony, and enjoy lunch and conversation with two Taungurung leaders as they cruise through the wetlands of tabilk-tabilk (place of many waterholes). The 4.5-hour tour begins at Tahbilk Winery, which is set in the wetlands of Nagambie on Taungurung Country and collaborates with Taungurung Elders to share knowledge of biik. *wawabiik.com.au* →

PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Cape Conran on the Bataluk Trail; Rock art at Bunjil Shelter in The Grampians; Getting up close with a resident echidna at Healesville Sanctuary; Human figures at Billimina Shelter in The Grampians.*



BATALUK CULTURAL TRAIL

The Bataluk Cultural Trail winds through East Gippsland like a thread stitching past to present, tracing the deep connection between the Gunaikurnai people and their land. Starting at the Knob Reserve in Stratford, visitors walk among scarred trees and ancient stone tools once used for survival and ceremony. At the Den of Nargun near Mitchell River, the earth holds stories of women's sacred spaces, cloaked in myth and legend. Further along, Legend Rock at Metung tells of greed and consequence, its surface etched with ancient lore. At Cape Conran, shell middens lie scattered like breadcrumbs of history – 10,000 years of gatherings, stories and saltwater songs still echoing in the wind. *batalukculturaltrail.com.au*

HEALESVILLE SANCTUARY

Set on the historic grounds of Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, Healesville Sanctuary honours the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation through immersive storytelling and connection to Country. Along Wurundjeri Walk, visitors are invited to reflect on the land's rich First Peoples history, with native plants revealing their traditional uses. Wurundjeri Elder and educator Murrundindi shares culture in-person with the Wominjeka Aboriginal Cultural Experience every Sunday, and most days during Victorian school holidays, with smoking ceremonies, storytelling and bush tucker knowledge that reveal the sacred relationship between people, animals and the environment. Bird-lovers can't miss the incredible Spirits of the Sky show featuring native birds daily at 12pm and 3pm. *zoo.org.au*

THE GRAMPIANS

Known as Gariwerd to Traditional Owners, the Grampians is a place of immense cultural and spiritual significance. This rugged landscape holds more than 80 per cent of Victoria's known First Peoples rock art, offering a powerful window into the region's deep heritage. Visitors can respectfully explore five remarkable rock art sites: Billimina and Ngamadjidj in the Wartook Valley, Manja Shelter near Hamilton, Gulgurn Manja shelter near Laharum, and the Bunjil Shelter near Stawell, where the creator spirit is depicted. Each site tells a unique story of connection to Country, shared through ancient handprints, dancing figures and Dreaming narratives etched into stone. *visitgrampians.com.au*

PHOTOGRAPHY: NEISHA BREEN

THERE'S SOMETHING UNMISTAKABLY Australian about a road trip: car packed, playlist on, landscapes shifting. Travelling down the highway toward Healesville, in Victoria's Yarra Valley, the mountains rise, flanking me on both sides. I feel its embrace, a silent invitation to explore what lies beyond. Moss-covered embankments rise on either side, and towering mountain ash trees form a green tunnel overhead. Road signs warn of wombats and cyclists but with giant ferns lining the roadside, the landscape feels prehistoric, as if a dinosaur might suddenly emerge. This, the Black Spur, is one of my favourite road trips.

THE BLACK SPUR

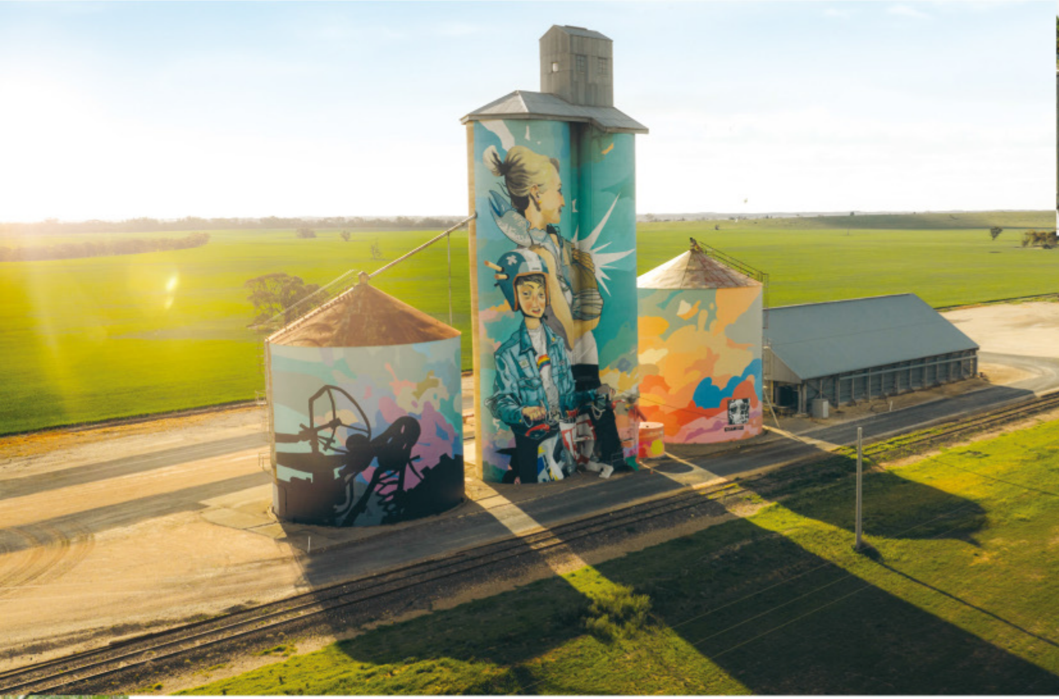
Location: Yarra Ranges
Duration: 30 kilometres / 30 minutes
The Black Spur is short compared to other Victorian road trips, just 30 kilometres, stretching from Healesville to Narbethong. But what it lacks in distance, it makes up for in scenery. Just outside Healesville, Maroondah Dam offers bushwalks and scenic views. However, if pressed for time, Selover's Lookout is an easy roadside stop offering uninterrupted views of the dam. In Narbethong, close to the Marysville's snowfield, is the Black Spur Inn, a charming double-storey brick hotel that's been welcoming travellers since 1863. Here, diners cosy up by the roaring fire or gaze through the floor-to-ceiling windows, imagining horse-drawn coaches carrying hopeful gold seekers to the eastern goldfields. →

Through the forested canopy of The Black Spur drive that winds from Healesville to Narbethong.

TRIPS and TRAILS

Wind through *FERN TUNNELS*, stop for a wine in a *TRAM BAR*, or chase *GIANT MURALS* across the wheatbelt. These *DRIVES AND RIDES* prove Victoria's best stories are found off the straight and narrow.

WORDS **KELLIE FLOYD**



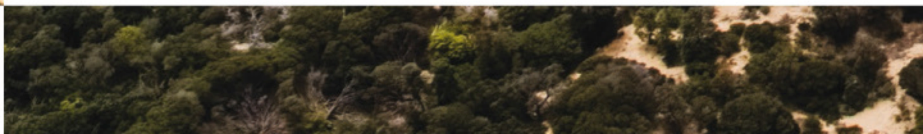
You'll encounter granite outcrops, eucalypt forests, rolling farmland and remnants of the region's mining past.

VICTORIA'S SILO ART TRAIL

Location: Various towns across the Wimmera Mallee region
Duration: More than 200 kilometres / 4–5 hours but best over a minimum of three days
What began as a way to draw travellers back into town bypassed by highways – places such as Nullawil, Sea Lake and Patchewollock – has grown into a celebrated outdoor art movement. The Silo Art Trail now includes 23 silos, each transformed with large-scale mural portraits sharing local stories, celebrating community heroes, Indigenous history, farming life, or regional identity. The Nullawil silo, for example, is a portrait of a local farmer in a chequered flannelette shirt alongside his loyal kelpie, painted by artist Sam Bates (AKA Smug). And the silos at Albacutya in the Grampians (pictured above), painted by artist Kitt Bennett, depict her joyful memories of growing up in the countryside. Many of the murals sit right in the heart of small towns, such as Rochester and St Arnaud, making them perfect spots to pause for a country pub meal or something sweet from a local bakery.

METUNG TO MALLACOOTA

Location: Gippsland
Duration: Approximately 220 kilometres / 4 hours
The Gippsland Lakes are a much-loved holiday spot in Victoria, but road-tripping further east reveals much more. Begin in Metung and time your visit with the monthly farmers' market, or simply linger over lunch on the lawn of the Metung Hotel. Twenty minutes away is Lakes Entrance, where you can watch the fishing boats return with their catch. Continue to Marlo, where the Snowy River spills into the sea, and Cape Conran for its many beaches and walks. If needing to stretch your legs, Croajingolong National Park is home to the historic Point Hicks Lighthouse and the Wilderness Coast Walk. Birdwatching and rainforest trails near Bemm River are worth a pit stop before arriving in Mallacoota, where the forest meets the sea.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *The Silo Art Trail in the Wimmera Mallee region; Terindah Estate; Gippsland Lakes; Pink Cliffs Reserve in Heathcote can be seen on the O'Keefe Rail Trail; The 12 Apostles on the Great Ocean Road.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA/ROBERT BLACKBURN (MARYSVILLE DETAIL); VISIT VICTORIA/ANNE MORELY (GRAMPIANS SILO TRAIL); VISIT VICTORIA/EMILY GODFREY (TERINDAH ESTATE, HEATHCOAT PINK CLIFFS); VISIT VICTORIA/JOSIE WITHERS (VIEW OF PAYNESVILLE GIPPSLAND LAKES); TOURISM AUSTRALIA/TWO PALMS/HARRY POPE (SUNSET OVER THE TWELVE APOSTLES); VISIT VICTORIA/LUMINAIRE PICTURES (LAKES ENTRANCE DETAIL)

GREAT OCEAN ROAD

Location: South-west Victoria, from Torquay to Allansford
Duration: Approximately 250 kilometres / 4–5 hours but best over a minimum of three days
Victoria's most famous road trip delivers it all: world-class surf breaks, rainforest walks, clifftop lookouts and wildlife encounters. The journey begins in Torquay, the state's surf capital, then hugs the coast past Anglesea and Lorne to Apollo Bay, before curving inland through the lush rainforest of the Otways. Stop at Cape Otway Lightstation or take to the treetops at Otway Fly. Between Cape Otway and Port Campbell lies the most photographed stretch – seven of the Twelve Apostles still standing, alongside the golden cliffs of Loch Ard Gorge. Further west, Warrnambool is a winter whale-watching hotspot, before the road winds to Port Fairy, a charming fishing village of whalers' cottages, walking trails and offshore seal colonies further along the coast.

BELLARINE TASTE TRAIL

Location: Bellarine Peninsula
Duration: Approximately 80 kilometres / 2–3 hours
The Bellarine Taste Trail is a feast for the senses, winding through coastal towns, past boutique wineries and artisan producers. It's a choose-your-own-adventure style trail – simply grab a map and build your own delicious journey. You might wander historic, seafront Queenscliff, sip wine in a converted tram bar at Terindah Estate, sample a locally distilled whisky at The Whiskery in Drydale or pick up a jar of honey at Wattle Grove in Wallington. Seafood lovers can head to Portarlington, famous for its mussels. Eat them fresh at local restaurants or head out on the water with Portarlington Mussel Tours.

TRAILS

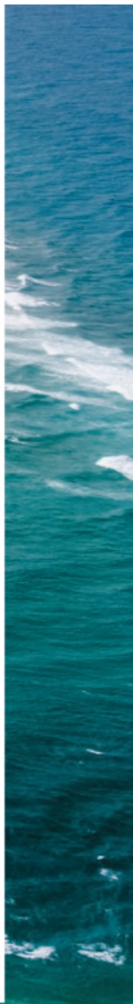
Like a road trip, a bike trail is about more than the destination. The slower pace lets you soak up the details along the way.

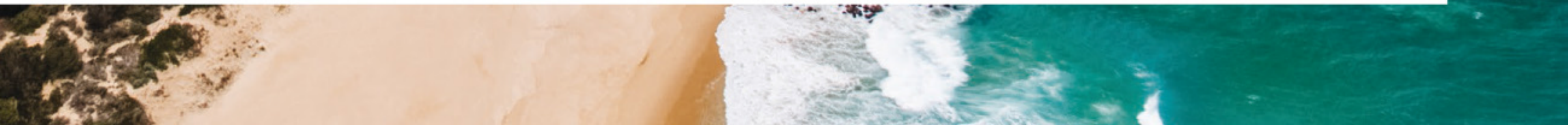
O'KEEFE RAIL TRAIL – BENDIGO TO HEATHCOTE

Location: Central Victoria
Duration: Approximately 50 kilometres / 4 hours cycling
Travellers first journeyed between Heathcote and Bendigo in 1888, when the railway line was built to link the towns. Trains stopped running in 1956, but today the route has a new life as the O'Keefe Rail Trail. The path is mostly level for easy riding, and along the way you'll cycle past bushland, waterways and reserves. There are plenty of places to picnic, birdwatch, and if you're lucky, spot a platypus. The trail is well supported with water stations, bike repair points, shelters, and signage. Axedale makes a great halfway stop, with the pretty Campaspe River Reserve for a rest and local cafes for refuelling. Begin in Heathcote, known for its wineries and cafes, or in Bendigo, which is easily reached by train from Melbourne/Naarm. Shorter sections, such as Heathcote to Axedale, are also popular.

GOLDFIELDS TRACK – BALLARAT TO BENDIGO

Location: Central Victoria
Duration: Approximately 210 kilometres / 2–3 days cycling
The Goldfields Track traces a route once so rich in gold it made Melbourne one of the wealthiest cities in the world. Starting at Mt Buninyong, south of Ballarat, the trail leads mountain cyclists and walkers north through Creswick, Daylesford and Castlemaine before finishing in Bendigo. Along the way, you'll encounter granite outcrops, eucalypt forests, rolling farmland and remnants of the region's mining past. As it passes through the lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung and Wadawurrung people, the track shares gold rush history and Indigenous stories brought to life by interpretive signs. Walk or ride the full trail or choose from one of its three distinct sections. With cosy stays, cafes and pubs, it's easy to mix wilderness with comfort.





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GOLDEN ERA
Once a gold rush town, Ballarat remains a true treasure as a UNESCO Creative City that is pulsing with innovation and inspiration. Here you'll uncover everything from a thriving arts scene to incredible culinary offerings. Turn to page 120 for more.

PHOTOGRAPHY: BALLARAT TOURISM

KEYS to the RIVER

SLOW down and find your *RHYTHM* on a Murray River *JOURNEY* through TIME and place.

WORDS **RICKY FRENCH**

THIS PAGE: *Paddlesteamers are an iconic sight on the Murray.*

TRUST IS A FUNNY THING. It seems not that long ago that my mother was insisting on pouring the milk into my cereal bowl, because she didn't trust me not to slosh it over the table, and yet here I am on the Murray River at Mildura in far north-west Victoria, being handed the keys to a very new and very expensive luxury houseboat.

After a crash course in how not to crash, I'm at the wheel of the good ship *Elevate* – pride of the All Seasons fleet – guiding her upstream past red-ochre cliffs as pelicans glide above the rippled river and kookaburras call from reedy banks. There's a brief moment of breath-holding while I negotiate a hairpin turn around a jagged reef of skeletal, submerged gum trees, before a cheer rings out and calm descends as the timeless river unfurls in front of us.

A journey along the Murray River is never less than magical, and launching from Mildura makes perfect sense. Up here the river is wide and largely empty, giving novice skippers like myself the confidence to nudge the 60-tonne houseboat up to the riverbank where we tie up for the night, without fear of shattering the glass elevator (the boat is fully wheelchair accessible) or spilling our Champagne.

My friends and I spend three days on the water, swimming and fishing, sitting around campfires onshore at night, and basking in air so warm you'd swear you were in the tropics. The simplicity of river life reveals an interesting dichotomy: we feel disconnected from the world but at the same time connected to Country, privileged to be part of something so ancient and special.

The six-hour drive from Melbourne/Naarm to Mildura (or four hours and 20 minutes from Adelaide) is more than worth it, but you don't have to travel that far to find fun on the river. Once Australia's largest inland port, Echuca is the closest point on the Murray to Melbourne (two hours 45 minutes), and you'll still find a plethora of paddlesteamers tethered to the historic timber wharf, a throwback to the thriving river trade days of the 19th century. The *PS Adelaide*, →

PHOTOGRAPHY: BEN SAVAGE; THE PRECINCT STUDIOS (BIRD DETAIL)

ALEXANDER ARBUTHNOT
ALEXANDER ARBUTHNOT
ALEXANDER ARBUTHNOT

PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM AUSTRALIA/VISIT VICTORIA (PADDLESTEAMER); VISIT VICTORIA/EMILY GODFREY (BELL TENT IN BARMAH NATIONAL PARK); VISIT VICTORIA/EWEN BELL (DETAIL)

FROM LEFT: *Historic 19th-century paddlesteamers cruise along the Murray River; Camping riverside in Barmah National Park, listed as a Ramsar site for its significant wetland values.*

built in 1866 and the oldest wooden-hulled paddlesteamer operating in the world, departs daily for one-hour cruises, while a brand-new paddlesteamer, the *PS Australian Star*, is launching luxury seven-night voyages in December through APT Touring.

The town is also a hot food and wine destination. St Anne's Winery at the historic Port of Echuca precinct has an incredibly photogenic cellar door, set inside an old carriage builders' workshop on the wharf and filled with huge, 3000-litre port barrels. The Mill, meanwhile, is a cosy winter spot to sample regional produce as an open fire warms the red-brick walls of this former flour mill.

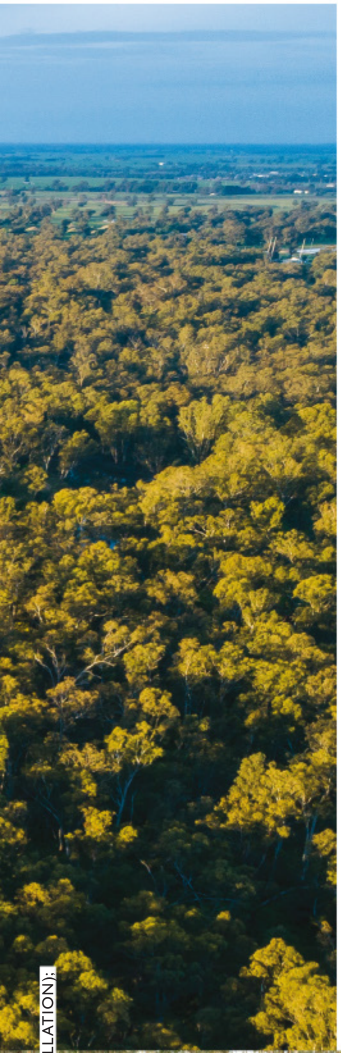
Just half-an-hour upstream, Barmah National Park is flourishing, its river red gum landscape (the largest in the world) rebounding magnificently after the recent removal of more than 700 feral horses. The internationally significant Ramsar-listed wetland sits in the heart of Yorta Yorta Country, with Traditional Owners managing the environment in close partnership with Parks Victoria. Walkways weave through the forest, crossing creeks lined with rare or threatened plants, passing remnants of Yorta Yorta oven mounds and numerous scar trees, where the bark was removed to build canoes, containers or shields.

The Dharnya Centre (open weekdays until 3pm) is the cultural hub for the Yorta Yorta. Visitors can learn about the ecological significance of the Barmah Lakes on a 90-minute river cruise, led by a First Nations guide, or take a one-hour, guided cultural walking tour along the Yamyabuc Trail.

Continue east to Cobram to find the southern hemisphere's largest inland beach. Swarming with sun-seekers in summer, the white sand of Thompson's Beach is shaded by majestic river red gums and dotted with hundreds of beach umbrellas, as beachgoers launch all manner of water craft and set up stumps for beach cricket. But the beach is at its most captivating at sunset, when the crowds thin out, the glassy river mirrors the purple sky, and the canopies of the gum trees glow fiery orange. →

The region is also home to some fine resorts and indulgent retreats. Yarrawonga Mulwala Golf Club Resort has two riverside championship golf courses, luxury apartments and self-contained villas, and while not strictly on the Murray, the historic wine town of Rutherglen is rife with boutique (and unique) accommodation, including an exquisitely renovated red-brick tower in a French provincial-style castle at Mount Ophir Estate. Fans of fortified wines can unravel the mystery of Rutherglen's 'Muscat Mile', meeting the vignerons and master-blenders whose artistry has put the town on the global map for this rich and complex wine style.

Follow the river far enough upstream and you'll arrive at the twin border cities of Albury-Wodonga. The Hume Highway thunders through, but serenity can be found along the five-kilometre Yindyamarra Sculpture Walk – part of the Wagirra Trail that meanders through river wetlands just west of Albury in Wiradjuri country. Fifteen sculptures by local First Nations artists line the trail, conveying stories of reconciliation, enduring connection to culture, local Milawa lore and traditional practices. It feels a long way from Mildura, and it is, but the pelicans and kookaburras remind us that it's the same river, the great conduit that connects our country.



We feel disconnected from the world but at the same time connected to Country.

CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: *The Murray River winding through Yarrawonga; Bruce Munro's* Trail of Lights *in Mildura; New Mildura motel Kar-rama; Yarrawonga Mulwala Golf Club Resort; First Nations Yindyamarra Sculpture Walk is part of the Wagirra Trail.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROB BLACKBURN (RIVER LANDSCAPE); VISIT VICTORIA (GOLF COURSE)
CARMEN ZAMMIT (KOOKABURRA SCULPTURES); IMOGEN EVESON (TRAIL OF LIGHTS INSTALLATION);
IAIN BOND PHOTO (KAR-RAMA)

A traveller's checklist

Staying there

KAR-RAMA is a brand new boutique, retro-styled motel in Mildura, with a butterfly-shaped pool and a tropical, Palm Springs vibe. *karrama.com.au*

ECHUCA HOLIDAY HOMES has a range of high-end accommodation options, both on the riverfront and in town. *echucaholidayhomes.com.au*

Playing there

Artist Bruce Munro's **TRAIL OF LIGHTS** installation, comprising more than 12,000 illuminated 'fireflies', is currently lighting up Mildura's Lock Island in the middle of the Murray. *mildura.com/lights*

MURRAY ART MUSEUM ALBURY (MAMA) is a hub for contemporary art, with a rotating roster of exhibitions, and is a major outlet for young and First Nations artists. *mamalbury.com.au*

Eating there

Mildura's diverse demographic means it's a fantastic place to eat. **ANDY'S KITCHEN** is a local favourite, serving up delicious pan-Asian dishes and creative cocktails in a Balinese-style garden setting. *milduraandyskitchen.com.au*

Call in to **SPOONS RIVERSIDE** in Swan Hill to enjoy locally sourced, seasonal produce in a tranquil setting overlooking the river. *spoonsriverside.com.au*

PIVOT CITY

Abandoned mills and *FORGOTTEN* paper plants are finding SECOND lives – and helping *REDEFINE* a city long underestimated.

WORDS **CHLOE CANN**

GEELONG CELLAR DOOR

PHOTOGRAPHY: ASH HUGHES (GEELONG CELLAR DOOR WINE BAR)

JUST 15 YEARS AGO, Federal Mills was a very different place. Once among the most significant industrial sites in Victoria, the historic woollen mill was one of a dozen that operated in Geelong at the industry's peak in the mid-20th century, helping the city earn its title as 'wool centre of the world'. But by the 1960s global competition and the rise of synthetic fabrics led to the slow decline of the industry, and Federal Mills finally shuttered its doors in 2001. Within a few years, the abandoned North Geelong grounds had become makeshift pastoral land, with cows and goats grazing among the overgrown grass between the empty red-brick warehouses. It was a forgotten pocket of the city, all but two klicks from the bustle of the CBD.

Today, the century-old complex stands reborn. The distinctive sawtooth-roof buildings have been sensitively restored. An old silo is splashed with a bright floral mural, landscapers have transformed the grounds, and the precinct is once again alive with activity. More than 1000 people work across 50-plus businesses here. It's so busy, in fact, that on a sunny Thursday morning in the thick of winter, it's hard to find a car park. The high ceilings, open-plan design, and large multi-paned windows – revolutionary features for factories of their time – have again become a drawcard.

At Paddock, one of the precinct's newer tenants, weaving looms and dye vats have been replaced by a wood-fired brick oven and heavy-duty mixers. Open since April 2024, the bakery looks right at home here; the building's industrial shell is softened by ivy climbing its steel frames, and sunlight streams through the tall windows. Outside, among the white cedar trees, families at picnic benches linger over dippy eggs and bagels, while white-collar workers pass in and out, single-origin coffee and crème brûlée doughnuts in hand.

FEDERAL MILLS

PADDOCK
PADDOCK
BAKERY
& PATISSERIE
TOILETS

CLOWKWISE FROM LEFT: *Geelong has shaken off its industrial identity to become an innovative urban hub with reimagined heritage spaces; Historic woollen mill Federal Mills; Paddock Bakery and Patisserie is housed within the historic wool factory.*

ON THE RISE

"A lot of people are now seeing the merit of investing in Geelong," says Paul Traynor, the head of Hamilton Hospitality Group, which redeveloped Federal Mills. A city once shunned as Sleepy Hollow, and spurned for its industrial, working-class roots and 'rust belt' image, Geelong has long since reclaimed its 'Pivot City' title, having reinvented itself as an affordable, lifestyle-driven satellite city, and a post-COVID migration hotspot.

And the numbers stand testament to the change. In March 2025, and for the first time in its history, Greater Geelong became Australia's most popular regional town for internal migration, overtaking Queensland's Sunshine Coast. Current forecasts suggest Geelong will continue to outpace many other Australian cities and towns, with jobs growing at double the rate of the population.

Tourism is booming, too. The 2023-24 financial year was the port city's busiest on record, with 6.4 million visitors making it one of the fastest-growing destinations in the country. It's not hard to see why: beyond the city's prime positioning as a gateway to both the Bellarine Peninsula and the Great Ocean Road, Geelong's tenacity and cultural ambition stands out.

As Australia's only UNESCO City of Design, Geelong is swiftly shaking off its industrial past to become a model for urban renewal, innovation, sustainability and creative communities. The signs are everywhere, from the revitalisation of the city's waterfront, and the landmark design of the Geelong Library and Heritage Centre and Geelong Arts Centre, to the growing network of local designers, architects and artists, and the

→

THE
PADDOCK
BAKERY

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
The Woolstore is a new restaurant and bar housed within a century-old warehouse; The space has a fine dining ambience; The menu is an eclectic mix of modern Australian dishes; The venue is set by the Barwon River.

woolstore
RESTAURANT + BAR
13

FROM LEFT:
Inside Federal Mills' industrial-style restaurant 1915; The cavernous building is a restored former boiler house.

burgeoning roster of festivals and events. That's not even mentioning the adaptive reuse of storied old industrial buildings – from Federal Mills, to Little Creatures' brewery 'village' housed within a 1920s textile mill – or the city's flourishing food and wine scene.

FOOD FORTUNES

Traynor credits now-closed local restaurant Igni, which opened in 2016, as the turning point for Geelong's hospo industry. "[Aaron Turner, Igni's chef-patron] was probably the first guy, with all due respect, to raise the bar food-wise for Geelong," he says. "People now treat it really seriously, and there's clearly a market for it."

While Igni is gone, Turner now helms a string of other notable Geelong venues, including Songbird, The Hot Chicken Project and Tacos y Liquor, all within the buzzy, street art-speckled laneways of the CBD's Little Malop Street Precinct. Many others have also popped up in Igni's wake, including Federal Mills' own restaurant, 1915.

Housed within the cavernous boiler house, 1915's interior is dramatic: soaring, vaulted ceilings with timber beams, exposed brick, a huge arched window. The share plates echo the space's bold character, playing with contrast and texture, with dishes such as a compressed watermelon tataki, the sweet, juicy squares tempered by salty strands of fried leeks, and charred, smoky snow peas dusted with saganaki on a nutty bed of romesco.

The Hamilton Group's latest hospo project, The Woolstore, opened in February. It occupies a century-old riverside warehouse and exudes a more sultry, fine dining ambience. Much like Federal Mills, the blueprint was to preserve the original brickwork, tallowwood flooring and nods to the building's former life. That same careful consideration extends to the well-versed, affable waitstaff as well as the kitchen. Head chef Eli Grubb is turning out an eclectic mix of ambitious and indulgent mod Oz dishes that deliver: strikingly tender skewers of chicken *tsukune*, infused with hints of smoke from the parrilla grill, and glazed with a moreish, sweet *gochujang* 'jam'; nduja arancini fragrant with hints of aniseed and the earthy lick of sunny saffron aioli; and golden squares of potato pavé, adorned with tiny turrets of crème fraîche, crisp-fried saltbush leaves, and Avruga caviar, to name but a few stand-out dishes.

> *It's one of few complexes of its time to survive intact. It feels steeped in history and spellbindingly rustic.*

OLD WALLS, NEW LIFE

On the city's fringe, hidden down a winding side road with little fanfare, lies a long-dormant site that's being gently revived. Built from locally quarried bluestone and brick, and dating back to the 1870s, the complex of original tin-roofed mill buildings is lush with greenery and backs onto the Barwon River and Buckley Falls; the audible rush of water provides a soothing soundtrack. Fyansford Paper Mill is one of few complexes of its time to survive intact. It feels steeped in history and spellbindingly rustic.

"We were looking for an old industrial place that had some charm and romance to it," explains Sam Vogel, the owner, director and winemaker at Provenance Wines which moved here in 2018. When he first viewed the building with his former co-owner, it was in such a state of disrepair that the tradie tenant occupying the space had built a shed within it to escape the leaking roof and freezing winter temperatures. "To say it was run down would be an understatement," he notes. "There was ivy growing through the place; the windows were all smashed. It was a classic *Grand Designs* project."

The team has since invested more than a million dollars into their new home. Where paper processing machinery once sat, wine barrels are now stacked. Vaulted cathedral ceilings are strung with festoon lights, and hidden in plain sight lies a shadowy mural by local street artist de rigueur Rone – one of only two permanent works by the artist (the other being at his mum's house). →

PHOTOGRAPHY: AMY CARLON (WOOLSTORE); MONIKA BERRY (1915 INTERIOR); HARRY POPE/TWO PALMS (1915 FEDERAL MILLS EXTERIOR)

While the award-winning, cool-climate pinot noir, riesling and chardonnay naturally remain a key draw at Provenance, the winery's restaurant is a destination in itself. Impressed already by whipsmart service, I devour one of the most cleverly curated and faultlessly executed degustations I've had in some time. It's all prepared in a kitchen that is proudly zero-waste, and committed to providing seasonal, ethical and locally sourced meat and produce under head chef Nate McIver. Think free-range venison served rare with a syrupy red wine jus and a half-moon of neon-orange *kosho*, *shokupan* with a deeply savoury duck fat jus (a modern Japanese take on bread and drippings), and a golden potato cake adorned with a colourful confetti of dehydrated nasturtiums and tomato powder, and planted atop a sea urchin emulsion.

The complex is home to a coterie of independent businesses, including a gallery, a jeweller, and its latest tenant, ceramicist Elizabeth Bell, drawn here by the building's "soul". "There's so much potential for these buildings to have new life breathed into them," says Bell, whose studio is housed within the old pump room. "Even people in Geelong don't know we're here," she says. "It's definitely a destination, but I like that. It has a really calming atmosphere."

A Melbourne transplant, Bell now feels at home in Geelong, which offers something Melbourne didn't. "If this business was in Melbourne I don't think it would've been as successful," she notes. "It's very collaborative in Geelong, and I don't think you get that as much in Melbourne; you're a bit more in it for yourself. Here it's about community over competition." AT

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *Paddock Bakery can be found at Federal Mills; Ceramicist Elizabeth Bell has a store in Fyansford Paper Mill; Woolstore's menu is designed for sharing; Bell's handcrafted functional pieces on display.* OPPOSITE: *Provenance Wines moved to Fyansford Paper Mill in 2018.*

PROVENANCE
CELLAR DOOR

PHOTOGRAPHY: CAMERON MURRAY PHOTOGRAPHY (PROVENANCE WINES); GALLANT-LEE (PADDOCK)

ONE PERFECT ESCAPE

The Mornington Peninsula blends *VINEYARDS*, galleries, GOLF, and *DELICIOUS* finds for an unforgettable getaway that indulges all penchants.

WORDS **KELLIE FLOYD**

MONTALTO
CHARDONNAY
MONTALTO

CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: *Montalto Vineyard is an idyllic setting for afternoon wining and dining; The cool-climate winery offers several tasting experiences; Wander around Pt. Leo Estate's outdoor gallery; The estate boasts three elegant dining venues.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA/ROBYN LEA (MONTALTO VINEYARD); VISIT VICTORIA/JESSE HISCO (PT. LEO ESTATE SCULPTURE DETAIL); VISIT VICTORIA/TWO PALMS/ARIANNA HARRY (DINING AT PT LEO ESTATE); VISIT VIC/HARRY POPE/TWO PALMS (WINE AT MONTALTO)

JUST OVER AN HOUR FROM MELBOURNE, the Mornington Peninsula blends coast and country in a way that feels effortlessly indulgent. It's a region where vineyard views meet acclaimed dining, art and culture is never far from the sea, and where hot springs bubble alongside rolling fairways. Whether your escape is a long lunch, an immersive art trail or a round of golf, the Mornington Peninsula has an itinerary to match. And there's always a glass of good local pinot waiting for you at the end of the day.

A CREATIVE TRAIL THROUGH THE PENINSULA

The Mornington Peninsula is a haven for artists and creatives. Its coastal views and rolling landscapes have long been a source of inspiration. Stay at the historical InterContinental Sorrento, a grand hotel established in 1875, recently renovated to blend heritage charm with contemporary elegance. With curated art lining the hotel's corridors and rooms, you could spend hours simply wandering the halls, studying the walls.

If looking for an outdoor gallery with sea views, head to Pt. Leo Estate, a landscaped vineyard home to a sculpture park featuring more than 70 large-scale works by both local and international artists, all easily accessible by connecting paths. After strolling through the vineyards, there are three dining options: fine dining at Laura, a relaxed meal at Pt. Leo Restaurant or a vino at the Wine Terrace. For something more hands-on, sign up for the Sip & Sketch experience. And if you book directly into the elegant Lancemore at Lindenderry Red Hill, you'll enjoy free access to the sculpture park.

For those who like their art framed by rolling hills, vines and wetlands, Montalto is the place. More than 30 sculptures are dotted throughout the property. The vineyard offers a formal restaurant and casual tables among the seasonal produce in a setting that feels like Mr. McGregor's Garden from *Peter Rabbit*. And there's always the option to picnic on the lawn.

The Sorrento-Portsea Artists Trail offers a self-guided walk along bush paths and sea cliffs to see the same landscapes that once inspired brushstrokes of some of Australia's most famous artists. Along →

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: *Tasting plates at Green Olive at Red Hill; It's an outdoor experience at Green Olive; Soaking at Alba Thermal Springs & Spa; Inside the sleek bathhouse; Peninsula Kingswood Country Golf Club; Jetty Road Brewery; It serves craft beers and pub fare; Luxurious stay, Cassis Red Hill.*

the way, interpretive signs share insights into the area's artistic past.

And, if the peninsula's weather turns a little wild, the region is brimming with galleries, particularly around Flinders, Sorrento and Red Hill. Artisan studios are open by appointment.

A CULINARY ESCAPE

With more than 200 vineyards, around 60 wineries and cellar doors, plus an abundance of breweries, distilleries, orchards and family-run farms spanning generations, the Mornington Peninsula is a playground for food and wine enthusiasts.

The perfect base for a culinary inclined trip is Cassis Red Hill, where luxury accommodation is tucked between grape vines and olive trees. A quiet nod to the fishing village of Cassis in the south of France, this retreat is all about contemporary elegance – crisp linen, sunlit interiors and a private mineral plunge pool.

Then, for a stand-out lunch, Green Olive at Red Hill offers a delicious way to enjoy the region. Graze on generous tasting plates with house-made relishes, lamb sausages, local cheese and just-picked garden produce. Pair it with a wine flight or order a picnic hamper to enjoy among the olive grove; there's a picnic option for your dog, too. And for a playful twist, Green Olive is home to what is believed to be Australia's only pickleball court set within a vineyard or orchard.

Amid the many wineries with open cellar doors, Main Ridge Dairy offers a delicious detour – a goat dairy where you can sample handcrafted cheeses and even meet the resident goats. For a more refined experience, Paringa Estate is one of the peninsula's most awarded wineries, offering fine dining with sweeping vineyard views

Walk along bush paths and sea cliffs to see the same landscapes that once inspired brushstrokes of some of Australia's most famous artists.

and a menu crafted from seasonal, locally sourced ingredients.

If you're looking to step outdoors before a lingering lunch, during winter Flinders Truffles offer the chance to join their clever dogs and search for the black gold under oak trees.

For an authentic taste of the region, time your visit with one of the Peninsula's vibrant farmers' markets. The Red Hill Community Market is the biggest – brimming with seasonal produce, handmade goods, and delicious treats.

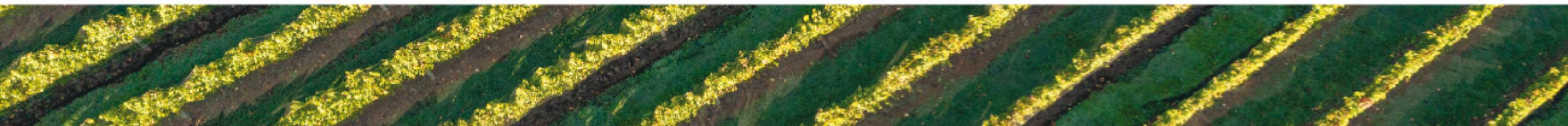
GREENS, GRUB AND THE 19TH HOLE

With its champion courses, the Peninsula is a dream destination not only for those who love to tee off but for those who enjoy the post-golf wind down. Peninsula Kingswood Country Golf Club draws keen golfers from around the world, while Peppers Moonah Links Resort is a course that has hosted both a PGA tournament and two Australian Opens. For a true test of skill, The Dunes Golf Links is one of Australia's top public courses.

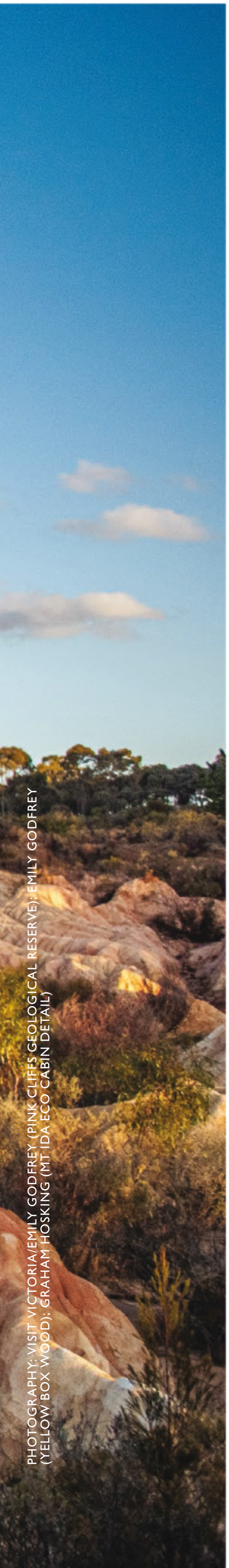
Each golf course offers accommodation, and staying onsite means maximum convenience. Especially at The Dunes, where premium rooms have you sleeping right next to the fairway. Off-course indulgence is close at hand, too, with Peninsula Hot Springs and Alba Thermal Springs just next door, where thermal waters drawn from geothermal mineral springs deep underground provide the ultimate recovery after a day of perfecting your swing. These award-winning wellness sanctuaries offer everything from bathing pools to private plunges and spa treatments.

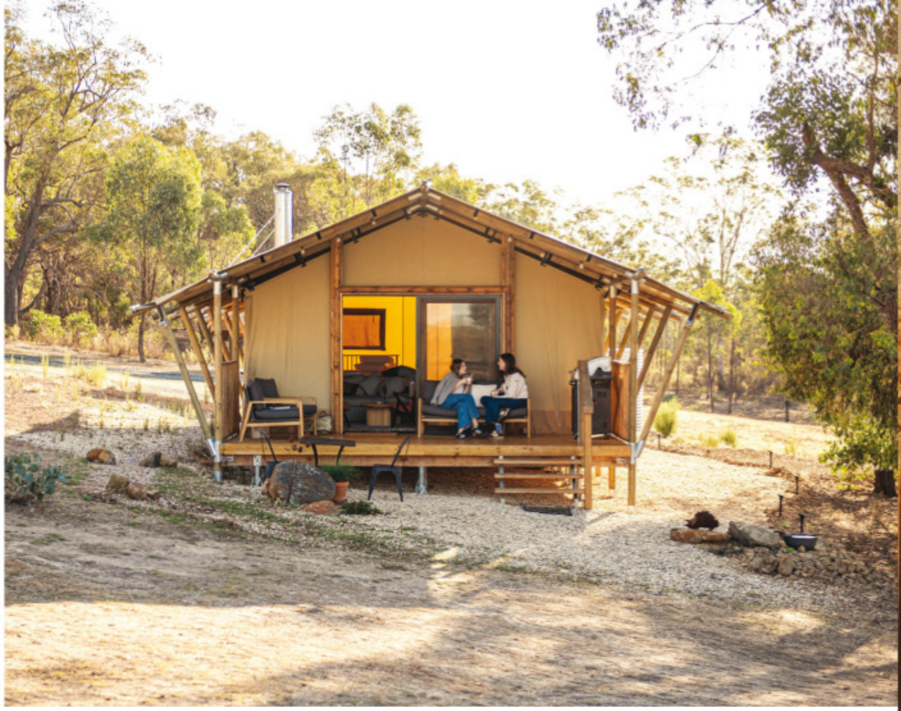
After sinking the last ball, and the 19th hole beckons, the Peninsula serves up just as many dining options as it does golf courses. Just minutes away and right on the beach, Jetty Road Brewery is a laid-back spot perfect for a round of beers and typical pub fare. For something a little elevated, book a table at Epicurean. Here, a glass of local red pairs beautifully with handmade pastas and woodfire pizza, all served in a historical coolstore and packing shed dating back more than a century.

PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA/ HARRY POPE/TWO PALMS (VINEYARD DETAIL AT GREEN OLIVE AT RED HILL); VISIT VICTORIA (ALBA HOT SPRINGS, PENINSULA KINGSWOOD COUNTRY GOLF CLUB); TOURISM AUSTRALIA (GREEN OLIVE AT RED HILL FROM ABOVE); VISIT VICTORIA/ROBERT BLACKBURN (SHARING BOARD AT GREEN OLIVE)



ECO TRIPPING IN
HEATHCOTE





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *The dramatic landscape of Heathcote's Pink Cliffs Geological Reserve; Yellow Box Wood's safari-style tents are nestled on 40 hectares of bushland.*

From cabins to canvas, *CRAFT DISTILLERS* to destination *DINING*, Heathcote locals reveal their *ECO-SAVVY PASSIONS* in ways that resonate with those seeking to travel *LIGHTLY.*

WORDS **MARGARET BARCA**

HEATHCOTE, ON TRADITIONAL Taungurung Country in Central Victoria, is synonymous with its garnet-hued shiraz, but wine isn't the only string to its bow. The town itself is sprinkled with heritage buildings from the gold rush era, and beyond that a growing collection of sustainable gastronomy and eco-friendly escapes.

Nearby Bendigo, one of only 65 cities in the world recognised as a UNESCO Creative City and Region of Gastronomy, plates up an astonishing calibre of produce, wine and food for its size. Increasingly the entire region is taking up the challenge, though Heathcote in particular shines with its focus on sustainability.

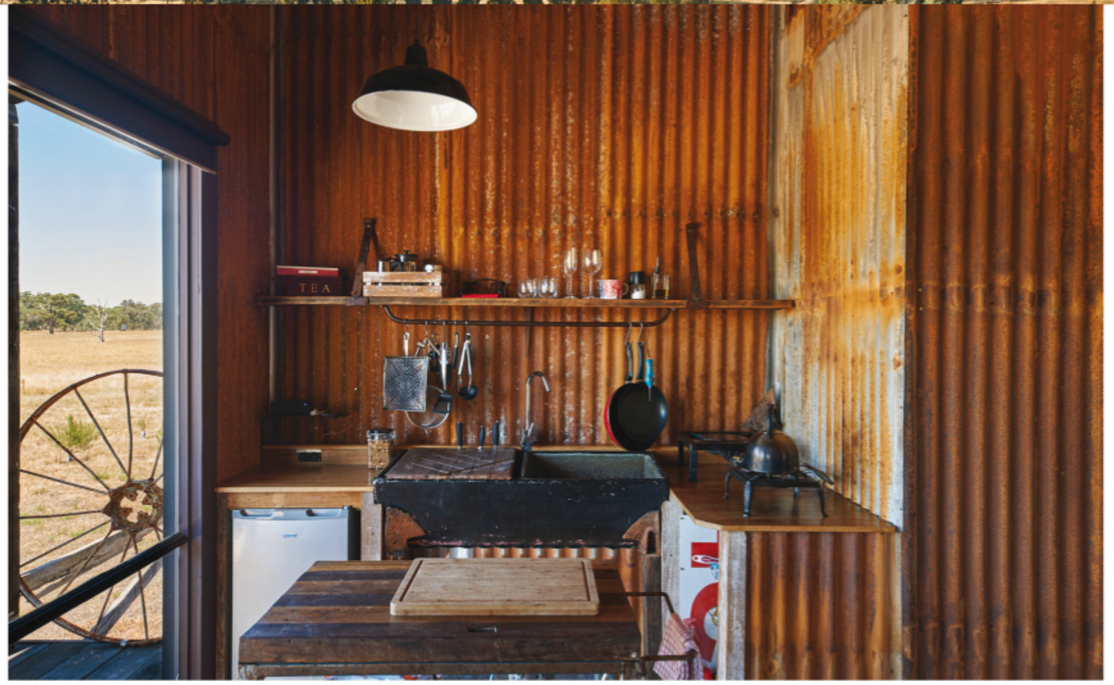
Andee and Lisa Davidson spent years working in southern Africa before settling in Heathcote. "We had a vision of how this could be," explains Andee. "We wanted a retreat, but one that was off-grid and environmentally sustainable."

Now, at Yellow Box Wood, two luxury safari-style tents are at the heart of 40 hectares of rolling hills and native bush, with kangaroos, wallabies, echidnas, goanna and birdlife aplenty. It's all solar-powered, wood for the fire is mainly fallen timber, and water is collected on the carport roof. No lack of creature comforts though – en suite with rain shower, espresso coffee maker, comfy seating, wood-burning fire all set to go. There's also a solar-heated, mineral salt pool in a bush setting, walking tracks, and even a mini bush golf course.

On my visit, I put the vision to the test. Cocooned in the plush four-poster bed I can glimpse the stars, while the heater casts a golden glow on the canvas. In the morning, I wake to a blush-pink sunrise, kangaroos feeding and a soundtrack of magpies.

If a tent is not your style, Stephen and Cally Trompp's carbon-neutral Mt Ida Eco Cabin might entice with its generous deck and farmland views. →

PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA/EMILY GODFREY (PINK CLIFFS GEOLOGICAL RESERVE); EMILY GODFREY (YELLOW BOX WOOD); GRAHAM HOSKING (MT IDA ECO CABIN DETAIL)



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Three Dams Estate make Spanish-style wines; Inside Mt Ida Eco Cabin; Silver Spoon's award-winning restaurant; The winery is completely off-grid.* OPPOSITE: *Mt Ida Eco Cabin is rustic and simple but oozes comfort.*

Inside the cabin, corrugated iron walls as rusty as a shearing shed, gleaming (recycled) floorboards, timber truss ceiling (crafted by Stephen), wood-fired heater and an old-school turntable with a pile of vinyls to spin. It's fun, and a little boho.

"Everything is recycled. The cabin takes maximum advantage of the sun in winter. It's all solar-powered. Don't panic, though," says Stephen, "you can still charge your phone and get 4G reception!"

Settle into an Adirondack chair on the deck or pedal off on a mountain bike to suss out the wineries.

Another person with a vision is Evan Pritchard at his Three Dams Estate where the wines reflect his deep love of Spain and of Spanish-style grapes, such as tempranillo. Afternoons in the 'wine shed' or cantina are matched with music (flamenco is a favourite), Spanish bites from tapas to paella (with Evan on the pans!) and views to Mount Alexander.

Sustainability is also a passion. "You don't need to buy anything. We decided to be off-grid from the start, but it is a lifestyle change," he says. "You need to think about it and be careful."

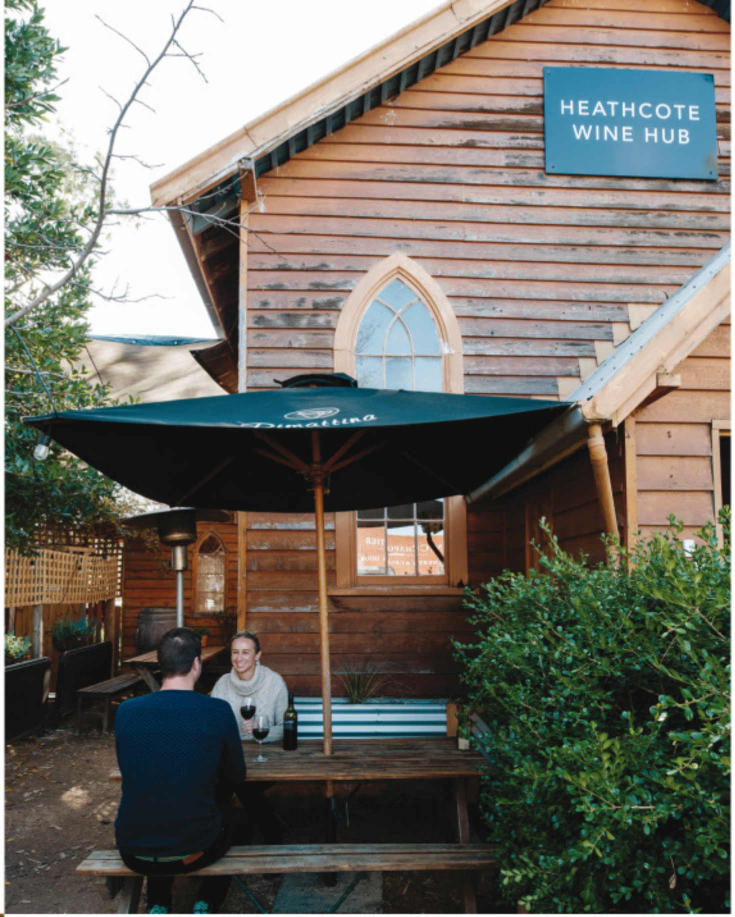
Everything here is recycled, reassembled, refurbished. Evan has an electric car (with solar-powered charger), solar-power for the winery, and even a jaunty little electric tractor/forklift.

"I love the idea of all the things you can do using the sun." Sipping a crisp *rosado* (a Spanish rosé) with Evan in the sunshine, I couldn't agree more.

On the other side of Heathcote, Silver Spoon Estate demonstrates sustainability on a more extensive scale. Tracie and Peter Young's winery, cellar door, award-winning restaurant and their own house are all solar-powered and off the grid. Sustainability is intrinsic to everything they do.

The property sprawls across 100 hectares, with 20 hectares under vine – shiraz, viognier, grenache, tempranillo. As the climate has changed, so too has the approach. These are dry-grown vineyards. "We prune for drought. That means lower yields but more intense flavours," says Peter. →

PHOTOGRAPHY: GRAHAM HOSKING (MT IDA ECO CABIN, VINEYARDS AT SILVER SPOON ESTATE, MOUNTAIN VIEW DETAIL AT SILVER SPOON ESTATE)



The fine-dining restaurant offers sweeping views, a wood-burning fire and a deck for languid lunches. Head chef Ben Hong sources regional, sustainable ingredients and weaves estate wines into the menu – think crispy wild mushroom arancini, viognier-infused chicken breast.

Not all local wineries have a cellar door, but I find local treasures at the Heathcote Wine Hub, a petite 1855 timber church in the main street, lovingly returned to life by Karen Robertson and Carey Moncrieff.

“Carey is a scrounger,” says Karen. “He doesn’t throw a single thing away.” He does, however, craft things into something quite special. Heritage floors, light-filtering lancet windows and shelves of regional wines create the perfect ambience for wine tasting. Or order a glass and linger over a cheese platter.

Heathcote is not all wine, of course. Nathan Wheat and partner Vanessa Curtis run Envy Distilling with a committed sustainable ethic – and a serious love of gin. Their small-batch distillery produces grape-based gin, and soon brandy. Distilling water is reused in an ingenious cooling system. All waste is treated on site. They buy excess wine from winemakers to distil and buy recycled barrels. “Distilling with the sun,” as Nathan says.

Each Envy gin has its own story. Spicy, award-winning The Dry, is designed to capture the region’s dry, rugged nature. Pull up a stool at the bar (reclaimed timbers and tiles, of course), order a Gin Flight, or kick back with a cocktail and let Nathan share his eco journey.

envy
Picnic Gin
The Dry

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Heathcote Wine Hub is housed in an 1855-built timber church; Sample gins at small-batch distillery Envy; Fodder serves delicious brunch fare; Award-winning French restaurant Chauncy; Sip on wines among the vines at Sanguine Estate; Envy’s gins are grape-based and traditionally made.*

envy
DISTILLING

A traveller's checklist

Getting there

It's less than two hours' drive from Melbourne/Naarm. The scenic route we take goes past Sunbury, then along a splendid country road through Romsey and the magic, boulder-strewn landscape of Lancefield. Watch for kangaroos on the road!

Staying there

Go off grid in style at **YELLOW BOX WOOD** (*theyellowboxwoodheathcote.com.au*) for glamping, or try **MT IDA ECO CABIN** for a couple's weekend hideaway. (*airbnb.com.au*)

Eating there

At award-winning **CHAUNCY**, French chef Louis Naepels and sommelier wife Tess Murray have created a tiny, elegant pocket of rural France. Meticulously restored 1850s sandstone building, sun-drenched dining room, impeccable service, a menu suffused with local flavours and thoughtful wine pairings. Book well ahead. *chauncy.com.au*

FODDER is both cafe and social hub. Chef Mo Pun and sister Lalita serve classic Aussie breakfast-to-lunch fare, though their Nepalese heritage sneaks through. *instagram.com/fodderheathcote*

Playing there

SANGUINE ESTATE's cellar door and terrace overlook bucolic vineyards. Its award-winning, dry-grown wines include the distinctive D'Orsa Blanc dessert wine, reflecting the family's Swiss-Italian heritage. Order a charcuterie board and stay a while. *sanguinewines.com.au*

Keep it carbon neutral by cycling some (or all) of the 50 kilometre **O'KEEFE RAIL TRAIL** to Bendigo.

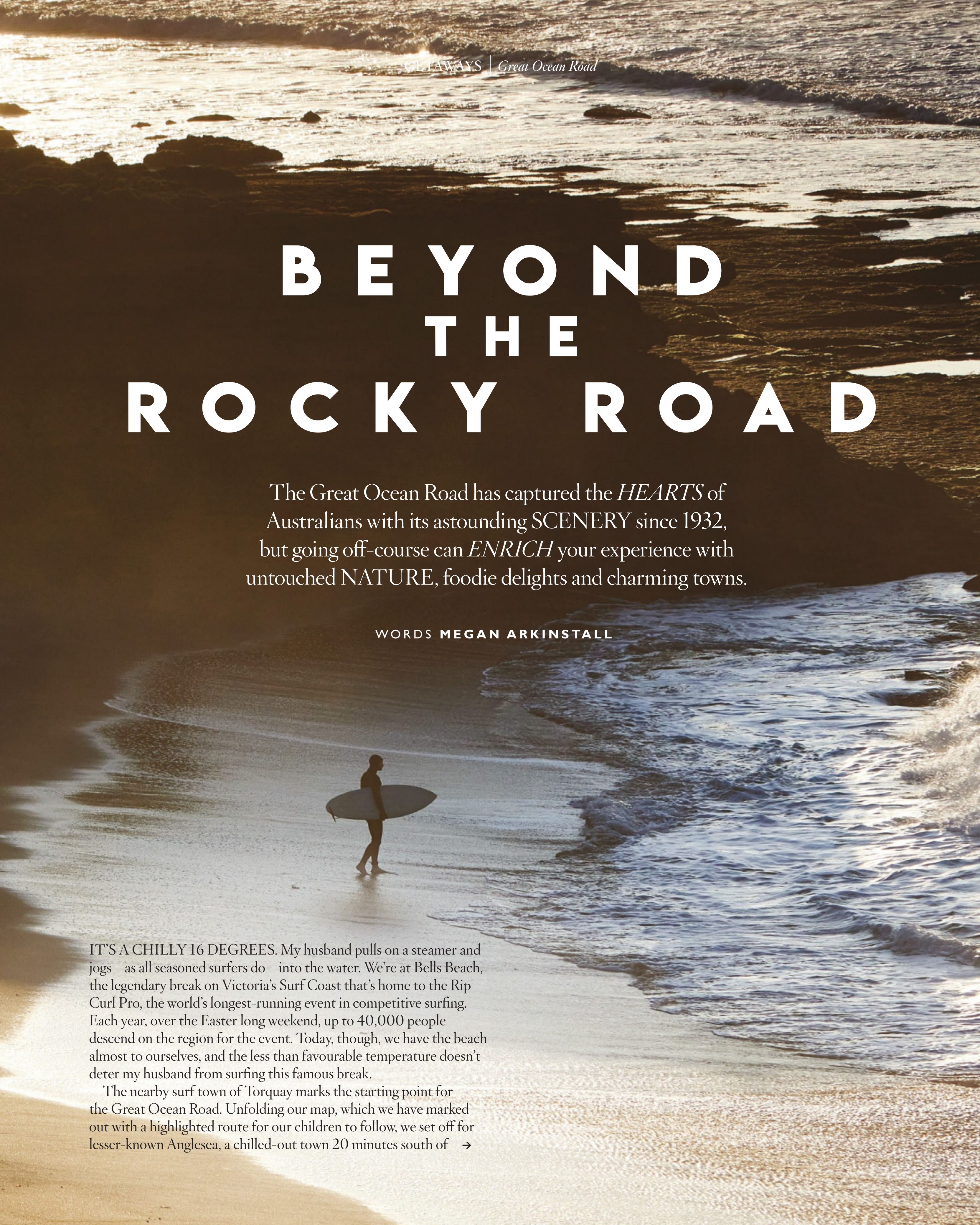
At **BRIDGEWARD GROVE**, learn about the property's Old Mission Grove heritage olive trees, do a sommelier olive oil tasting, and stock up on sustainably grown olives and oil. *bwgrove.com.au*

Explore the unique landscape, wildflowers and wildlife of **PINK CLIFFS GEOLOGICAL RESERVE**.

PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA/EMILY GODFREY (SANGUINE ESTATE); EMILY GODFREY (FODDER)

FROM LEFT: *One of the famous Twelve Apostles, limestone seastacks that rise from the Southern Ocean; Bells Beach is known for its epic surf break and is at the start of the Great Ocean Road.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: BEN SAVAGE (12 APOSTLES); TOURISM AUSTRALIA (BELLS BEACH)



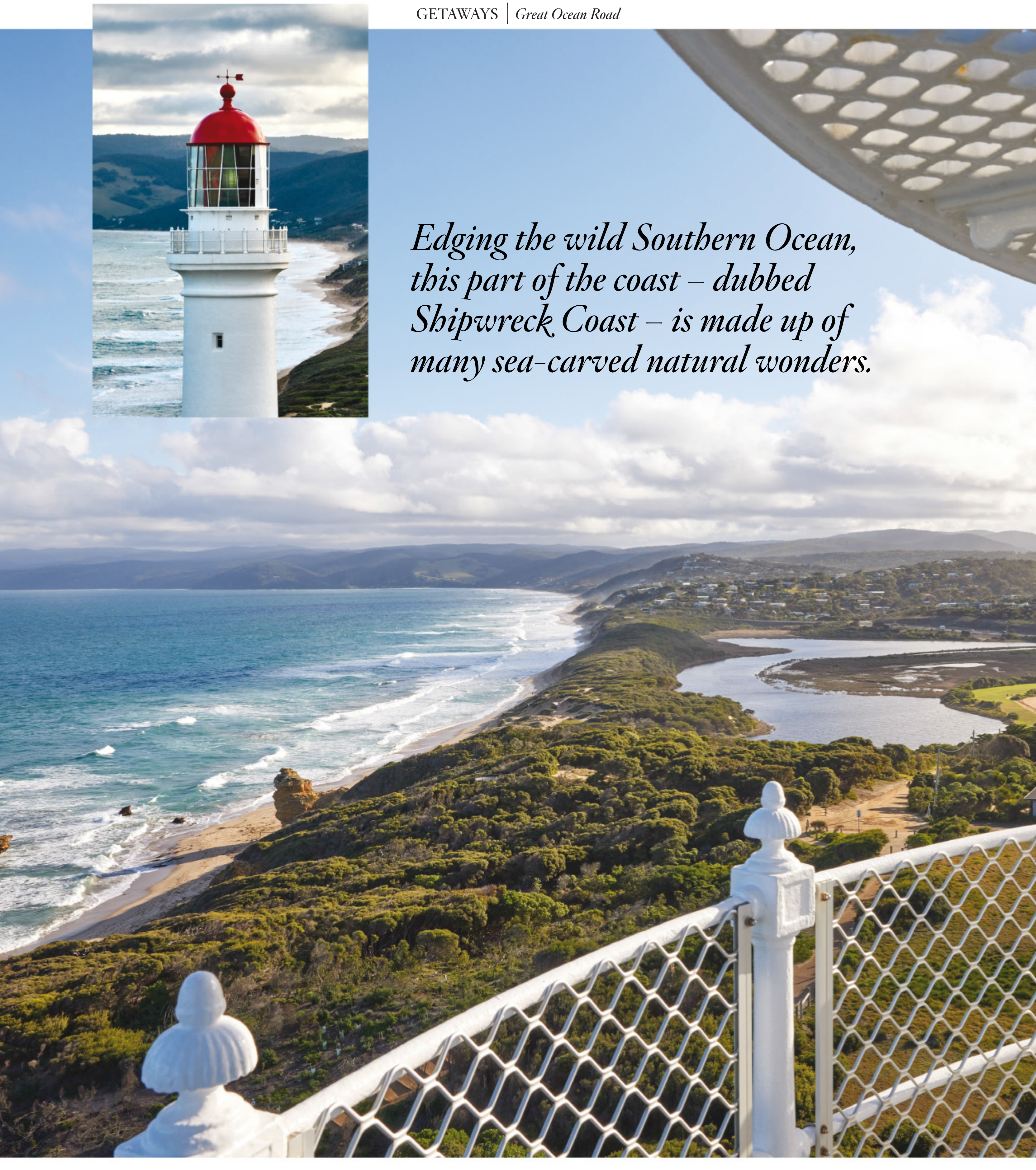
BEYOND THE ROCKY ROAD

The Great Ocean Road has captured the *HEARTS* of Australians with its astounding SCENERY since 1932, but going off-course can *ENRICH* your experience with untouched NATURE, foodie delights and charming towns.

WORDS **MEGAN ARKINSTALL**

IT'S A CHILLY 16 DEGREES. My husband pulls on a steamer and jogs – as all seasoned surfers do – into the water. We're at Bells Beach, the legendary break on Victoria's Surf Coast that's home to the Rip Curl Pro, the world's longest-running event in competitive surfing. Each year, over the Easter long weekend, up to 40,000 people descend on the region for the event. Today, though, we have the beach almost to ourselves, and the less than favourable temperature doesn't deter my husband from surfing this famous break.

The nearby surf town of Torquay marks the starting point for the Great Ocean Road. Unfolding our map, which we have marked out with a highlighted route for our children to follow, we set off for lesser-known Anglesea, a chilled-out town 20 minutes south of →



Edging the wild Southern Ocean, this part of the coast – dubbed Shipwreck Coast – is made up of many sea-carved natural wonders.

CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: *The red dome of Split Point Lighthouse in Aireys Inlet; The lighthouse overlooks the Shipwreck Coast; Erskine Falls is one of many falls within a day trip of Lorne; Brae is a three-hatted restaurant in Birregurra; The restaurant is owned and run by chef Dan Hunter.*

here. Its wide, sandy beach is a gentler swimming option for our young family. Groms can learn to surf here with Go Ride a Wave, which also runs stand-up paddle boarding on the Anglesea River.

After a couple of nights in Anglesea, we hit the road again, first stopping at Aireys Inlet. Here we stretch our legs at Split Point Lighthouse, which was made famous by the 1990s television series *Round the Twist*, before driving under the Memorial Arch that welcomes us, officially, to the Great Ocean Road. This 243-kilometre coastal road was built by returned First World War servicemen and serves as a permanent memorial to those who fought and died during the war. Carved into rock using hand tools and horse-drawn carts, it was a huge engineering feat and provided much-needed access to isolated coastal communities.

CHASING WATERFALLS

Lorne is a delightful beachside stop for lunch and browsing boutique stores. It's also the gateway to Great Otway National Park, which comprises a varied landscape of old-growth forests, cool-temperate rainforests, heathy woodlands and rugged coast. With the highest rainfall in Victoria, the region is home to many waterfalls – 10 of which are within 10 kilometres of Lorne.

Turning slightly off the main drag, we wind along a gum-shaded road to Erskine Falls. Here, our son leads the way through the hyper-green rainforest and down 200-plus stairs to the cascade that drops 30 metres into a lush fern gully. We hop over large boulders to get closer to the falls, enjoying the entire place to ourselves; it's worth the return climb.

From Sheoak Falls Picnic Area, there are walking trails to Henderson Falls, Phantom Falls, Won Wondah Falls and Kalimna Falls, some of which follow an old timber tramway from forest-logging days, which only came to an end in 2008.

You can follow your appetite north to the town of Birregurra, which is part of the Otway Harvest Trail that connects farm gates, markets, wineries, breweries and distilleries. It's home to three-hatted modern Australian restaurant Brae, helmed by celebrated chef Dan Hunter, set among native gardens and an organic farm, and Otways Distillery, which produces small-batch spirits using local produce and botanicals.

GREEN THERAPY

Back on track, the cliff-hugging stretch between Lorne and Apollo Bay is breathtaking. At Teddys Lookout, we overlook the winding road ahead and St George River spilling into the ocean.

We spend languid days in Apollo Bay, a buzzy seaside town that boasts a three-kilometre-long, crescent-shaped beach with a backdrop of rolling green hills. One evening, as the sun sets, we take the steep 10-minute walk to Marriners Lookout, which affords panoramic views of the ocean, hinterland and town.

A 15-minute drive along the road, Maits Rest is a lush rainforest gully that has been protected since the early 20th century. Wandering along the 800-metre boardwalk, we inspect the delicate moss-covered forest floor and the gnarled roots of 300-year-old myrtle beech trees, then crane our necks to see their canopies, some 50 metres above us. It's therapy in nature.

The southernmost tip of Cape Otway is a delightful detour, home to the 1848-built Cape Otway Lightstation, the oldest surviving lighthouse on mainland Australia. We climb the narrow winding staircase to the gallery deck, explore the keepers' quarters and telegraph station, and enjoy a coffee and some 'famous' scones at the charming onsite cafe. →

PHOTOGRAPHY: TOURISM AUSTRALIA (SPLIT POINT LIGHTHOUSE, BRAE); VISIT VICTORIA (ERSKINE FALLS); WILLIAM WATT (DETAIL); COLIN PAGE (BRAE INSET); CAMERON MURRAY/TOURISM AUSTRALIA (DAN HUNTER)

We admire these Aussie icons, in awe of Mother Nature's ever-evolving artwork.

A WILDLY BEAUTIFUL DRAWCARD

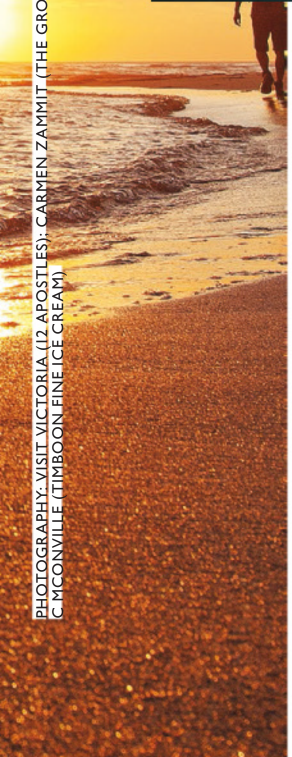
It's a pinch-me moment to finally see the Twelve Apostles in person. This unmistakable cluster of limestone stacks rising abruptly from the sea were never 12, however. When coined this in the 1890s as a marketing ploy, there were only nine; today, only seven remain after two collapsed in 2005 and 2009. We admire these Aussie icons from the viewing platform, in awe of Mother Nature's ever-evolving artwork.

Edging the wild Southern Ocean, this part of the coast – dubbed Shipwreck Coast – is made up of many sea-carved natural wonders including London Bridge, The Grotto and Gibson Steps. After exploring the lookout trails of Loch Ard Gorge/Poombeeyt Kontapool – its English name taken from the site of the 1878 shipwreck – we nestle into the sandy beach encircled by towering sandstone cliffs, as our children splash about on the water's edge, and soak it all in.

FOODIE DELIGHTS TO WILDLIFE SPOTTING

Just north of Port Campbell National Park, the region of Timboon is part of the 12 Apostles Food Artisans Trail, filled with purveyors of delicious foodstuffs such as Timboon Fine Ice Cream, Timboon Railway Shed Distillery and Apostle Whey Cheese. As an antidote to the indulgence, the 20-kilometre Poorpa Yanyeen Meerreeng Trail is a self-guided ride or walk between Port Campbell and Timboon through tall forests, over historic bridges and past sparkling lakes and farmland with grazing cattle.

CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: *Only seven of the Twelve Apostles remain; The Grotto is another natural attractuon within Port Campbell National Park; The Oak & Anchor in Port Fairy; A 19th-century building in Warrnambool; Timboon Fine Ice Cream is part of a regional foodie trail.*



PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA (12 APOSTLES); CARMEN ZAMMIT (THE GROTTO); PETER FOSTER (WARRNAMBOOL BUILDING); C MCONVILLE (TIMBOON FINE ICE CREAM)

In Warrnambool, a town rich in maritime history, we take the four-kilometre Thunder Point Walk that traces the coast. The kids squeal when an echidna shuffles out from beneath the wooden boardwalk, and we stop to admire a seal lazing on a rock at the port.

REASON TO LINGER LONGER

Further along, the streets of quaint fishing village Port Fairy are lined with 19th-century cottages, old stone churches and Norfolk pines. Follow the historic walking trail to see some of the 60-plus National Trust buildings. Port Fairy is also home to Port Fairy Folk Festival (6-9 March), one of the country's longest-running music and cultural festivals. You could time your road trip with the event for a fittingly celebratory end to any journey.

The Great Ocean Road can easily be done in three days, but we've spent a week on the road. The highlighted line on our now creased and well-worn map doesn't follow the famous route precisely. It has sprouted branches in many directions, leading us to untouched rainforest and charming rural towns filled with culinary delights, and where we experienced some of our most memorable moments on the Great Ocean Road.

A traveller's checklist

Staying there

THE MONTY is a highly anticipated, newly refurbished motel with a chic Palm Springs-inspired aesthetic set across the road from the Anglesea River. *themontymotel.com.au*

BASALT WINERY in Port Fairy grows cool-climate wines such as pinot noir and Riesling in rich volcanic soil. Stay among the vines in its tiny home, complete with a kitchen, lounge area and outdoor firepit. *basaltwines.com.au*

THE OAK & ANCHOR HOTEL has been a Port Fairy institution since 1857. Cosy up by the bar in winter or bask in the sunshine of the Lawn Bar in summer. The rooms are beautifully boutique with considered details, such as luxe baths for sinking into post-road trip. *oakandanchorhotel.com*

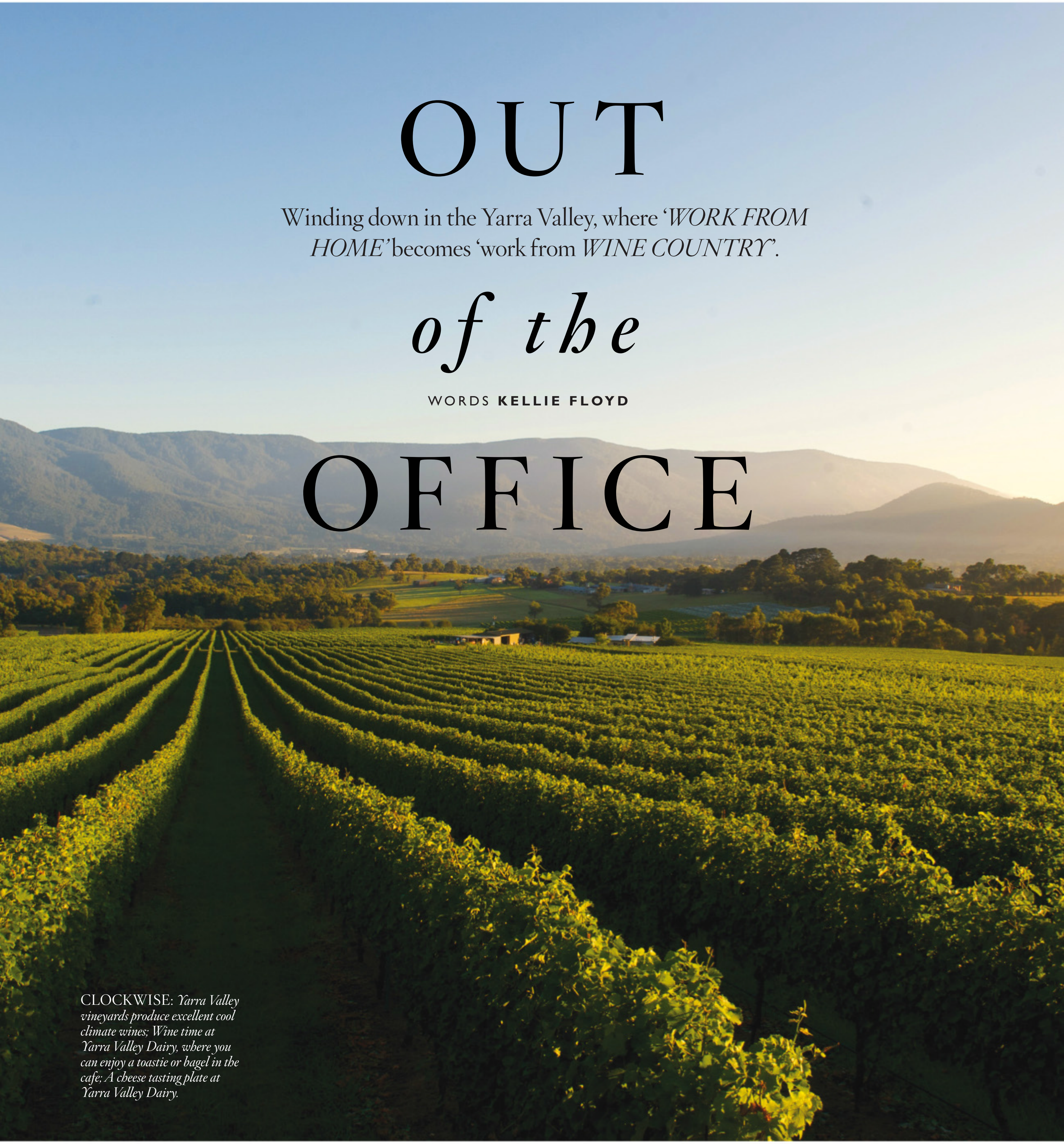
Eating there

THE COAST in Anglesea is a modern Australian restaurant focused on local ingredients. *thecoastrestaurant.com.au*

GRAND PACIFIC HOTEL has been a local landmark in Lorne since 1879 and recently underwent a restoration. It serves a mix of traditional pub and Italian fare alongside ocean views. *grandpacific.com.au*

GRAZE is a cosy 40-seat dining room in Apollo Bay with a modern Australian menu complemented by regional wines. *grazeapollobay.au*

APOLLO BAY DISTILLERY offers tasting flights, a gin blending masterclass and serves woodfired pizzas. *apollobaydistillery.com.au*

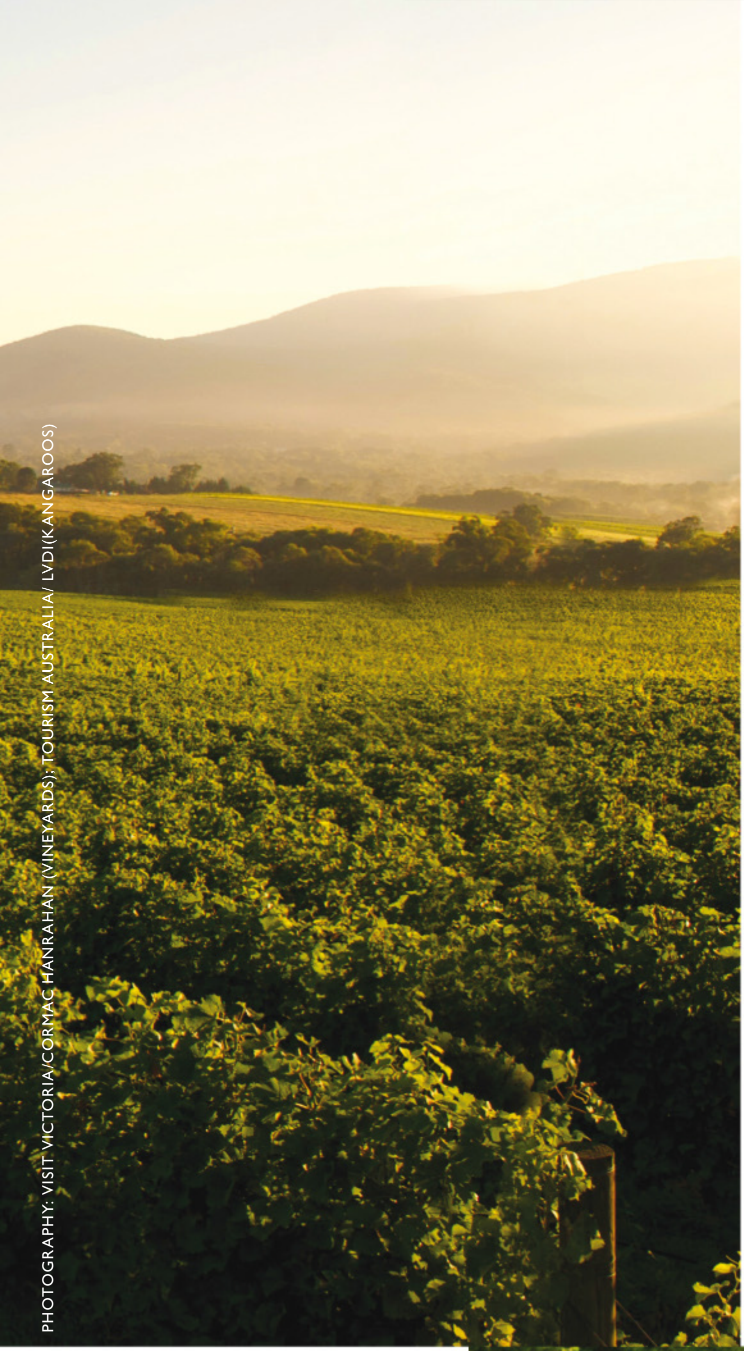


OUT *of the* OFFICE

Winding down in the Yarra Valley, where '*WORK FROM HOME*' becomes 'work from *WINE COUNTRY*'.

WORDS **KELLIE FLOYD**

CLOCKWISE: *Yarra Valley vineyards produce excellent cool climate wines; Wine time at Yarra Valley Dairy, where you can enjoy a toastie or bagel in the cafe; A cheese tasting plate at Yarra Valley Dairy.*



PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA/CORMAC HANRAHAN (VINEYARDS), TOURISM AUSTRALIA/ LVDI(KANGAROOS)

yarra valley
dairy

STEAM FROM MY MORNING COFFEE curls gently into the cool valley air, mist-veiled vineyards stretch out in neat rows below me. Magpies warble from trees, and the morning's quiet carries the soft bleating of lambs from a nearby paddock.

Midweek in the Yarra Valley has its own rhythm. It's slower, quieter, with more empty tables at cafes and cellar doors, and walking trails I can claim all to myself. It's as if the entire region takes a deep breath once the weekend crowd leaves.

I haven't come here for a holiday, but to do a little work somewhere other than my home office, where I spend too much time hunched over my desk. Deadlines still loom, meetings still happen, but with flexible work evolving from 'work from home' to 'work from anywhere', I'm swapping the view of my front yard to the vineyards.

With the Yarra Valley just over an hour from the CBD, many Melburnians could drive here in their lunch break. I arrive late in the afternoon and am delighted to discover the Yarra Valley Dairy still open. On weekends, I've seen queues spilling out the door, but today there's only one other couple inside. There's no need to rush to secure a table; instead I browse the little store, shelves stacked with chutneys, spices, artisan biscuits and gorgeous crockery that would look right at home in my kitchen. It's hard not to buy the lot.

I order a coffee and a small cheese platter, though the dairy has a full menu, and choose a wooden table with bentwood chairs by a wide window. The space feels part farm shed, part cosy café: corrugated iron ceiling, walls painted in muted tones and rustic furniture. Outside, cows meander toward milking sheds. If pressed for time, there's the option of quick cheese tastings – four samples for five dollars in five minutes – but today, I'm in no rush. I sip slowly, watching a grey sky settle over the paddock. Less than an hour ago I was hunched over my home-office desk, and now my racing mind has slowed to match the valley's pace. →

With the mist still lingering over the vineyards, I watch two hot-air balloons silently drift above clouds.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Restaurant 1309 at Balgownie Estate has views across the vines; Pop into the cellar door for a tasting; Oysters pair perfectly with a crisp white at Restaurant 1309; If you've indulged too much, you can stay onsite; Yering Station's cellar door.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: JAMES MORGAN (YERING STATION CELLAR DOOR)

As my car rolls to a stop at Balgownie Estate, I'm quietly excited, and curious to see if my plan to work and play comes off. I've chosen a suite with a spacious living area and a separate bedroom so I can keep work away from a good night's sleep.

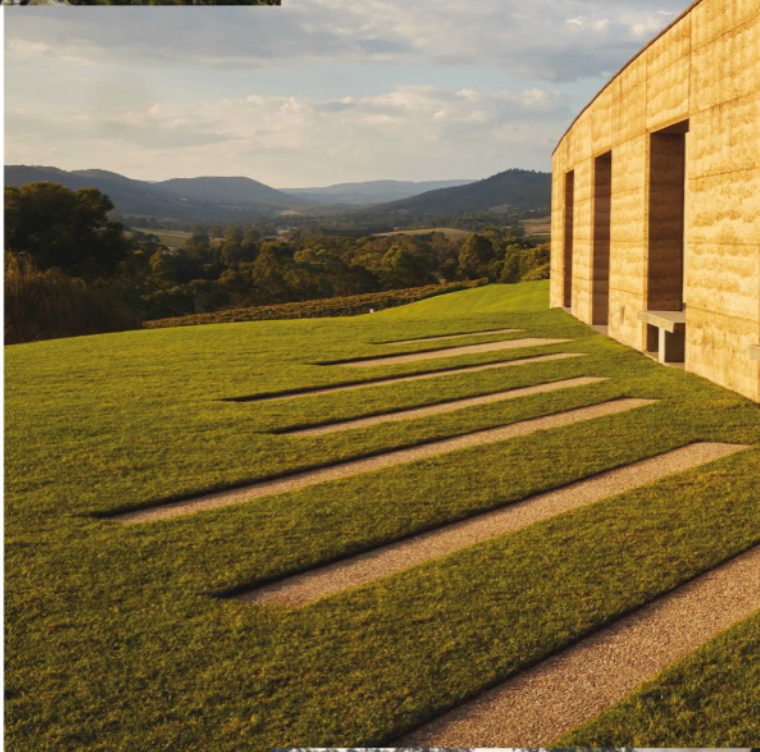
I could have booked a cosy cottage, complete with open fireplace, a comfy couch and a kettle for endless cups of tea, but as I am still here to get some work done, I opt for a place that takes care of everything. Dinner is served in Restaurant 1309, as is breakfast.

On my first evening, instead of the usual walk about my neighbourhood, I stroll through the estate at an unhurried pace. There's no need to rush – someone else is preparing my dinner after all. The walking trails offer beautiful sunsets, and it seems mobs of kangaroos enjoy the view, too. Many appear, grazing lazily on the hillside.

I wake to the call of birds and, after breakfast, with the mist still lingering over the vineyards, I watch two hot-air balloons silently drift above clouds. Perched on a hill, Balgownie Estate sits above the mist, leaving the valley below veiled white.

Perhaps because the Yarra Valley is relatively close to where I live, I've never considered exploring the area any way other than by car or on foot. And with a fear of heights, a hot-air balloon is firmly off the table. But when I discover I can hop on two wheels from the estate and cycle into Yarra Glen, I quickly realise it's the perfect way to step away from my laptop and experience a different side of the region.

COG Bike offers pedal-assist e-bikes, and while the bike trail and paths into town aren't particularly hilly, having an extra bit of 'oomph' means I can soak up the surroundings. Those lambs I heard calling early in the morning? I now find them at the paddock fence, sniffing my hands, perhaps hoping for food. Cows idle nearby, and at a fork in the bike path I turn left toward town. →



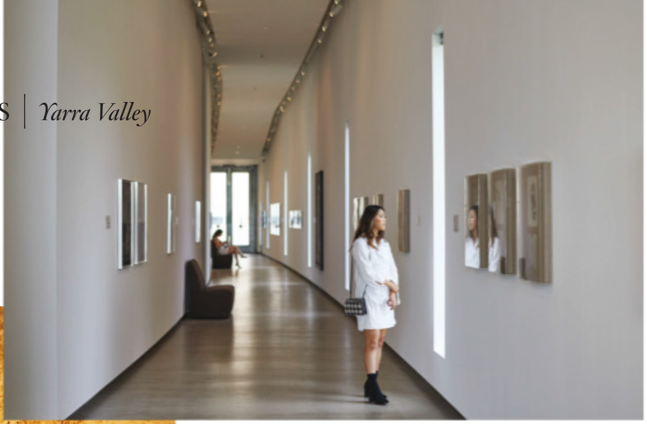
It's still morning, and the perfect time for a coffee break at The Vallie Store. If it were the afternoon, I'd likely turn right, in the direction of four wineries with cellar doors. The ride is about 15 kilometres return, but don't let that put you off. Staying off the highway, the route takes you along quiet backroads where you catch glimpses of local life – farmers on tractors, weathered sheds, rows of vines and the kind of peaceful countryside you don't see from the main road.

The beauty of basing myself in the Yarra Valley is how close everything feels. In barely half an hour I'm in the Dandenong Ranges, swapping vineyards for towering mountain ash and fern-filled gullies. The small villages of Olinda and Sassafras burst with cosy teahouses, antique stores and boutiques selling clothing and handmade body care items. I'm drawn to RJ Hamer Arboretum – Latin for 'a place for trees'. Having grown up among tall trees, I've always taken comfort in their presence, so this visit feels like a return of sorts. A stroll along the trails offers a choice: wide open views across patchwork paddocks below, or shaded paths that lead you deeper into the quiet hush of the peaceful forest.

The following day, I settle into a quiet corner on the balcony of Paradise Valley Hotel in Clematis and soon hear Puffing Billy's whistle and steady chuff as the steam train climbs towards town. Puffing Billy is one of Australia's most beloved steam trains, running through the Dandenong Ranges on a narrow-gauge track. It's famous for its open carriages where passengers can sit with their legs hanging over the sides as the train chugs through the forest. This is the perfect spot to wave to those on the train.

After my midweek break, I find my inbox still full and my to-do list not in the least shrunken, just shifted from one task to another. But I return to my home office feeling lighter, clearer and with a smug satisfaction I'd stolen back a little time for myself. A midweek wind-down made all the difference. AT

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *You'll find walking trails are less crowded during the week; TarraWarra Museum of Art; Admiring the works at the museum; The restaurant at Yering Station showcases the best produce of the Yarra Valley; The iconic Puffing Billy runs every day except Christmas Day.*



A traveller's checklist

Staying there

Balgownie Estate offers everything from cellar door tastings to spa treatments and fine dining – all without leaving the property. *balgownie.com*

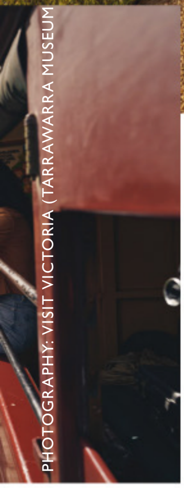
Playing there

Wander through Alowyn Gardens, including a stunning wisteria tunnel, then explore the collection of contemporary artworks at TarraWarra Museum of Art. *alowyngardens.com.au; twma.com.au*

Cycle the Yarra Valley with COG Bike to visit local wineries and cellar doors. *visityarravalley.com.au; cogbikesaustralia.com.au*

Eating and drinking there

Olinda Tea House offers an Asian-inspired high tea. Paradise Valley Hotel, Clematis has classic pub fare, while the iconic Yering Station offers wine tastings and a restaurant with seasonal dishes. *olindateahouse.com.au; paradisevalleyhotel.com; yering.com*



PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA (TARRAWARRA MUSEUM OF ART)

THE MAKERS OF BALLARAT

WORDS **MARGARET BARCA**

MAKERS, bakers, artists, chefs, crafters – Ballarat and its SURROUNDS are overflowing with creative spirits. All *DEDICATED* to keeping traditional skills alive for a CITY that is humming with artful *ENERGY*.

CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: *The table is set at Mr Jones; The Centre for Rare Arts & Forgotten Trades holds workshops to preserve crafts and skills; The centre is a beautiful place to learn an old skill; Ruby Pilven's ceramics at Ross Creek Gallery; The centre is a not-for-profit organisation.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: TONY EVANS FOR VISIT VICTORIA (MR JONES); TARA MOORE (ROSS CREEK GALLERY)

"KEEPING CRAFT ALIVE is a noble cause," says Jess Cameron-Wootten, a charming and passionate master leathercrafter and cordwainer, who handmakes traditional leather boots and shoes in Ballarat's old Gun Cotton Goods Store.

Ballarat was recognised in 2019 as a UNESCO Creative City of Craft and Folk Art, and today it's a place where craft traditions converge with contemporary needs. Nothing quite captures that convergence as a visit to Wootten, the workshop and store of Jess Cameron-Wootten and his partner Krystina Menegazzo.

Jess's father was an artisan bootmaker, or cordwainer. Now Jess and Krys and their small team of artisans continue the tradition, but with a modern spin. The company's boots and shoes, made completely from scratch, are renowned for their quality and longevity. Wootten also craft shoes, bags, belts, leather aprons, wallets and more.

Cosy beanies, gloves, alpaca socks, "unbreakable" shoelaces and various other goods – many from local craftspeople and small-scale makers – fill the shop's shelves. "We're always happy to support a mate," says Jess.

"People love to see the workshop and where things are made. Our clients care about quality and sustainability," Krys comments. The company slogan 'Made for generations' says it all.

For Ruby Pilven, craft is also in the DNA – both her parents were potters and with her latest porcelain ceramics, Ruby's young daughter has been helping add colour to the glazes.

"I grew up watching my parents in the workshop – I've always been doing ceramics," she says, although her Visual Arts degree was in printmaking. That printmaking training comes through particularly in the rich layering of pattern. Her audacious colour, unexpected shapes and sudden pops of 12-carat gold are contemporary, quirky – and joyful.

You can see Ruby's handcrafted ceramics, and work by other local and regional artists, at Ross Creek Gallery, a light-filled space surrounded by serene bushland, across from the mudbrick house her parents built in the 1980s. A 10-minute drive from Ballarat, it's a tangible link to the region's well-established craft traditions.

While tradition is ongoing, there's a danger that many of these specific type of skills and knowledge are fading as an older generation passes on. Step forward the Centre for Rare Arts and Forgotten Trades. The seven purpose-built studios occupy a fabulous modern building adjacent to Sovereign Hill, with

→

CENTRE FOR
RARE ARTS &
FORGOTTEN TRADES

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR TOP LEFT: *An artful laneway in the city; Chef José Fernandez creates vibrant South American streetfood at Pancho; Enjoy a cocktail at Itinerant Spirits; The distillery operates from an old goods shed; Hotel Vera is set in a historic Ballarat building; The rooms have a contemporary style.*

state-of-the-art facilities, enormous windows and landscape views across to Warrenheip and Wadawurrung Country.

Practising artisans run hands-on workshops. Fancy making your own medieval armour? Or trying your hand at blacksmithing, spinning wool, plaiting leather, weaving cane or craft a knife? Book a class and learn how.

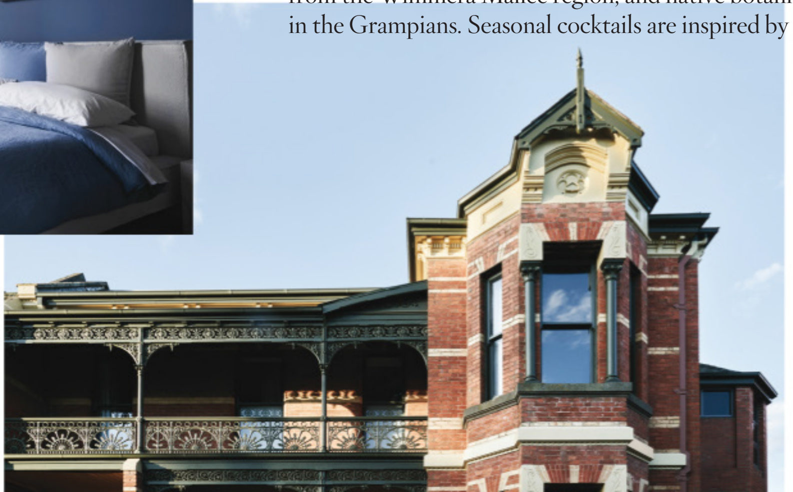
“It’s about creating awareness and also sharing knowledge and skills before they are lost,” explains Deborah Klein, the centre manager.

One skill that hasn’t been lost is that of cooking. Ballarat’s burgeoning gastronomy scene runs the gamut from an artisan bakery (the atmospheric 1816 Bakehouse) to cool coffee shops, speakeasy cocktail bars and distilleries to fine-dining venues. But I’m still surprised to find Pancho, José Fernandez’s South American street food restaurant, serving fried cheese *tequeños*, fiery fish tacos, Argentinian grilled chicken.

The room is as lively as the food – a whirl of colour filled with gifted and thrifted paintings, photos, *tchotchkes* (trinkets), plants. There’s a Mexican *abuela* aesthetic going on here. Even before the music and mezcal kick in, it’s fun. Heads up on the drinks menu – an authentic selection of mezcal, tequila, South American wines and Mexican cerveza.

The spirit is willing, so after lunch we head towards the gold rush-era Ballarat train station and across the line to the old 1860s Goods Shed for Itinerant Spirits. At one end, a massive German copper still looms behind a wall of glass. The fit-out embraces deep olive-green tones, original bluestone walls, steamer trunks as coffee tables, heritage timber floors, oversized lamp shades and cognac-hued modernist leather seating.

Gallivanter Gin, Vansetter Vodka and Wayfarer Whiskey – the key spirits distilled – star at the bar. The spirits are crafted using grains from the Wimmera Mallee region, and native botanicals foraged in the Grampians. Seasonal cocktails are inspired by local people →



PHOTOGRAPHY: BALLARAT TOURISM

ITINERANT
SPIRITS

It's about creating awareness and also sharing knowledge and skills before they're lost.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Ballarat's streets are lined with heritage buildings; Dining at Grainery Lane; Perridak Arts is a First Nations-run gallery; Stop for a cocktail at Reynard; Kryal Castle is medieval fun; Dalwhinnie Wines in the Pyrenees; Hotel Provincial has country house vibes; Chef Damien Jones plates up Asian-inspired fare at Mr Jones.; The Art Gallery of Ballarat is a must-visit.*

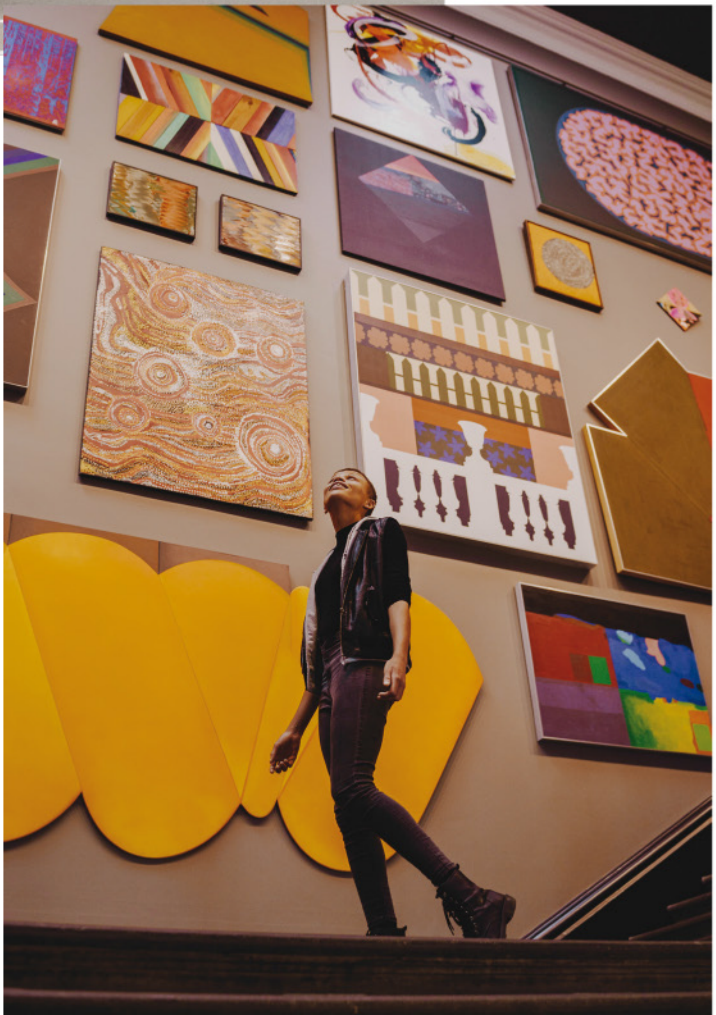
and places (I loved The Headland, inspired by Sovereign Hill and flavoured with old-fashioned raspberry drops). Sample the spirits, and join a cocktail masterclass or a distillery tour. It's a seductive setting – you'll likely find yourself ordering a charcuterie platter or pizza as the evening progresses.

New lives for old buildings keeps history alive. Vera, Ballarat's boutique five-star hotel, has taken it to the next level: it's a palimpsest, a subtle layering of early 1900s and 1930s Art Deco architecture with a sleek new wing. There are seven spacious suites, each a dramatically different colour, with designer chairs, blissful bathrooms. High-end pottery and hand-picked artworks imbue the spaces with personality.

Vera's intimate, award-winning restaurant, Babae, is subtly theatrical with sheer drapes and gallery lighting, its bespoke timber furniture and brass-edged marble bench setting the stage for food with a sharp regional focus.

"We have goat's cheese from a local supplier, handmade granola from local Vegas & Rose, truffles from nearby Black Cat Truffles, fresh food from our garden, and regional wines," says joint owner David Cook-Doulton.

Celebrating the local makers, bakers, growers and producers, and the master chefs who work their magic is all part of the rich tapestry that links Ballarat's history to its vibrant present.



KRYAL CASTLE

> *The local makers are part of the rich tapestry that links Ballarat's history to its vibrant present.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: MATT DUNNE (MR JONES, STEETSCAPE AND THE ART GALLERY OF BALLARAT); TONY EVANS (PERRIDAK ARTS).

A traveller's checklist

Getting there

It's 90 minutes from Melbourne/Naarm, either on the Western Freeway, or hop on a V/Line train from Southern Cross Station.

Staying there

HOTEL VERA is a centrally located Art Deco boutique hotel. *hotelballarat.com.au*

Consider **HOTEL PROVINCIAL**, which feels like a sleek country house, but with its own restaurant, Lola. *theprovincialballarat.com.au*

Eating there

Culinary whiz Damien Jones helms Chef's Hat winner **MR JONES DINING** with quiet assurance. His modern Asian food is deceptively simple with deep, intense flavours. Low-key, laid-back ambience, lovely staff, thoughtful wine list. *mrjonesdining.com.au*

Cocktails are definitely a thing in Ballarat. **REYNARD** (fox in French) is foxy indeed, a clubby space with top-notch cocktails and small bites. *renardballarat.com.au*

GRAINERY LANE is extravagantly OTT with its massive 1880s bar, myriad chandeliers, brass gin still, Asian-inspired food and lavish cocktails. *grainerylane.com.au*

Playing there

Check out local design legend **TRAVIS PRICE**'s wall murals in Hop Lane with its colourful canopy of brollies, or in Main Street. *travisprice.com.au*

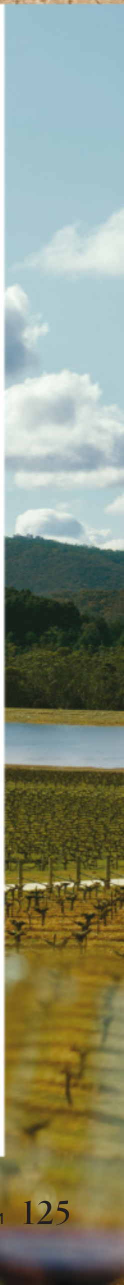
THE ART GALLERY OF BALLARAT's off-site Backspace Gallery showcases early-career artists in a stylish, contemporary space. *visitballarat.com.au*

First Nations-owned and run **PERRIDAK ARTS** connects people to place, bringing together art and crafts in this gallery/shop. *perridakarts.com.au*

The **WINERIES OF THE PYRENEES** are close at hand with their welcoming cellar doors and robust reds. *visitpyrenees.com.au*

Join a behind-the-scenes tour at the **THE CENTRE FOR GOLD RUSH COLLECTIONS**. *sovereignhill.com.au*

Don't forget the giant bluestone **KRYAL CASTLE**, 'the land of adventure', for a little medieval magic, and not just for the kids: get ready for Highland-style feasting, jousting, even overnight stays. *kryalcastle.com.au*



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Barrels of liquid gold at Kyneton Ridge Estate Winery; The estate's vineyard, where cool climate grapes are grown.*

SECRETS *of the vines*

Located just an *HOUR* north-west of Melbourne, the largely undiscovered *MACEDON RANGES* quietly pours some of Australia's *FINEST COOL-CLIMATE WINES* and serves up some of Victoria's *BEST FOOD.*

WORDS **EMILY MCAULIFFE**
PHOTOGRAPHY **CHLOE SMITH**

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Dining at Lake House Daylesford is a treat; Curious residents at Kyneton Ridge Estate; A tasting at Passing Clouds Winery; Pretty Kyneton; Stay at Cleveland Estate; The Clydesdale barn at Paramoor.*

MENTION THE MACEDON RANGES and most people will think of day spas and mineral springs around Daylesford, cosy weekends away in the countryside or the famous Hanging Rock (of enigmatic picnic fame).

Or they won't have heard of the Macedon Ranges at all.

But this cool-climate destination has been inconspicuously building a profile as a high-quality food and wine region and is beginning to draw serious attention from oenophiles and epicureans alike.

With elevations ranging from 300 to 800 metres, Macedon Ranges vineyards are among the highest in the country. This altitude, combined with significant day/night temperature swings, makes for a slow ripening season, in turn nurturing wines that embody elegance and structure. Think crisp chardonnays, subtle yet complex pinot noirs and delicate sparkling wines, along with niche varietals, such as gamay and nebbiolo.

Despite the region's natural advantages – which vary from estate to estate, as each site embodies unique terroir depending on its position in relation to the Great Dividing Range, soil make-up and altitude – the Macedon Ranges has remained something of an insider's secret. Unlike Victoria's Yarra Valley or Mornington Peninsula, you won't find large tour buses here and there's no mass marketing drawing crowds. Many of the 40-odd wineries are family-run operations with modest yields, meaning the wineries maintain a personal touch (if you visit a cellar door, you'll likely chat to the owner or winemaker themselves) and a tight sales circle that often doesn't go far beyond said cellar door. And that's part of the charm.

Though wines from the Macedon Ranges are just starting to gain more widespread recognition in Australia, the first vines were planted in the 1860s, with a handful of operators then setting up business in the 1970s and '80s. The industry surged again in the 1990s and early 2000s with the entry of wineries, such as Mount Towrong, which has an Italian slant in both its wine and food offering, and Curly Flat, now one of the largest estates. Then, within the last 15 years, a new crop of vignerons like Andrew Wood at Kyneton Ridge Estate, whose vineyard in 2024 was the first in the Macedon Ranges to be certified by Sustainable Winegrowing Australia; Geoff Plahn and Samantha Reid at Paramoor, who have an impressive cellar door with a roaring fire and studded leather couches in an old Clydesdale barn; and Ollie Rapson and Renata Morello at Lyons Will, who rapidly expanded →

GENERAL STORE

Many of the 40-odd wineries are family-run operations with modest yields... and that's part of the charm.

ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA (CLEVELAND ESTATE, LAKE HOUSE), KIM LANDY (PASSING CLOUDS WINERY)

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Empty bottles at Midnight Starling; The hatted restaurant is located in Kyneton; Retro Kyneton Springs Motel; Idyllic scenes at Castlemaine; Boomtown Winery and Cellar Bar; Delicate dishes on the menu at Midnight Starling.*

a small vineyard to focus on top-shelf riesling, gamay, pinot noir and chardonnay, have taken ownership of local estates.

Going back to the early days, Llew Knight's family was one of the pioneers of the 1970s, replacing sheep with vines at Granite Hills when the wool industry dwindled. Knight is proud of the fact that all their wines are made with grapes from their estate, including a light, peppery shiraz (some Macedon wineries purchase fruit from nearby warmer areas, such as Heathcote, particularly to make shiraz) and a European-style grüner veltliner. And, as many other wineries in the region do, he relies on natural acid for balance, rather than an additive, which is often required in warmer regions. "It's all about understanding and respecting your climate to get the best out of your wines," he says.

Throughout the Macedon Ranges, there's a growing focus on sustainability and natural and low-intervention wines, with producers, such as Brian Martin at Hunter Gatherer making waves in regenerative viticulture. Martin previously worked in senior roles at Australia's largest sparkling winemaking facility, and now applies that expertise and his own nous to natural, hands-off, wild-fermented wines, including pét-nat, riesling and pinot noir. "Wild fermentation brings more complexity," he says. "Instead of introducing one species of yeast, you can have thousands and they add different characteristics to the wine."

Most producers also focus on nurturing their grapes in-field and prune and pick by hand, thus avoiding the introduction of impurities and the need to meddle too much in the winery. "The better the quality of the fruit, the less you have to interfere with the natural winemaking process," says Wood.

Given the small yields, there's also little room for error, meaning producers place immense focus on quality. "You're never going to compete in the middle [in a small region] – you've got to aim for the top," says Curly Flat owner Jeni Kolkka. "Big wineries try to do things as fast as possible, but we're in no rush," adds Troy Walsh, owner and winemaker at Attwoods. "We don't use commercial yeasts, everything is hand-harvested and everything is bottled here, so we bottle only when we're ready, not when a big truck arrives." That's why, when you do see a Macedon Ranges product on a restaurant wine list, it's usually towards the pointy end.

If wine is the quiet achiever of the Macedon Ranges, then food is its not-so-secret weapon. In fact, the area has more hatted restaurants than any other region in Victoria.

A pioneer of the area's gourmet food movement is region cheerleader Alla Wolf-Tasker, culinary icon and founder of Daylesford's Lake House. For more than three decades, Wolf-Tasker has championed local producers and helped define what regional fine dining can look like in Australia. Her influence is palpable, not just in the two-hatted Lake House kitchen, but in the broader ethos of the region's dining scene, as a wave of high-quality restaurants have followed her lead to be come true destination diners.

It's easy to eat well, whether at other hatted restaurants, such as Midnight Starling in the quaint town of Kyneton, or at the wineries themselves, like Le Bouchon at Attwoods, where Walsh is inspired by his time working in France in both his food offering and winemaking.

The beauty of dining and wine touring in the Macedon Ranges is that it feels intimate and unhurried. You're likely to meet the winemaker, hear about the trials of the latest vintage firsthand, and taste wines that never make it to city shelves. And that's worth getting out of the city for – even if it is just an hour down the road.

KYNETON
MOTEL
KYNETON *Springs* MOTEL
NO VACANCY

A traveller's checklist

Staying there

Soak up vineyard views from **CLEVELAND ESTATE** near Lancefield, (*lancemore.com.au*) embrace retro charm at **KYNETON SPRINGS MOTEL** (*kynetonspringsmotel.com*) or indulge in lakeside luxury at the **LAKE HOUSE** (*lakehouse.com.au*).

Eating there

Enjoy a four-course menu at the one-hatted **SURLY GOAT** in Hepburn Springs (*thesurlygoat.com.au*), Japanese-inspired fare at **KUZU** in Woodend (*kuzu.com.au*), or unpretentious fine dining at **MOUNT MONUMENT** (*mountmonument.com.au*), which also has a sculpture park.

Playing there

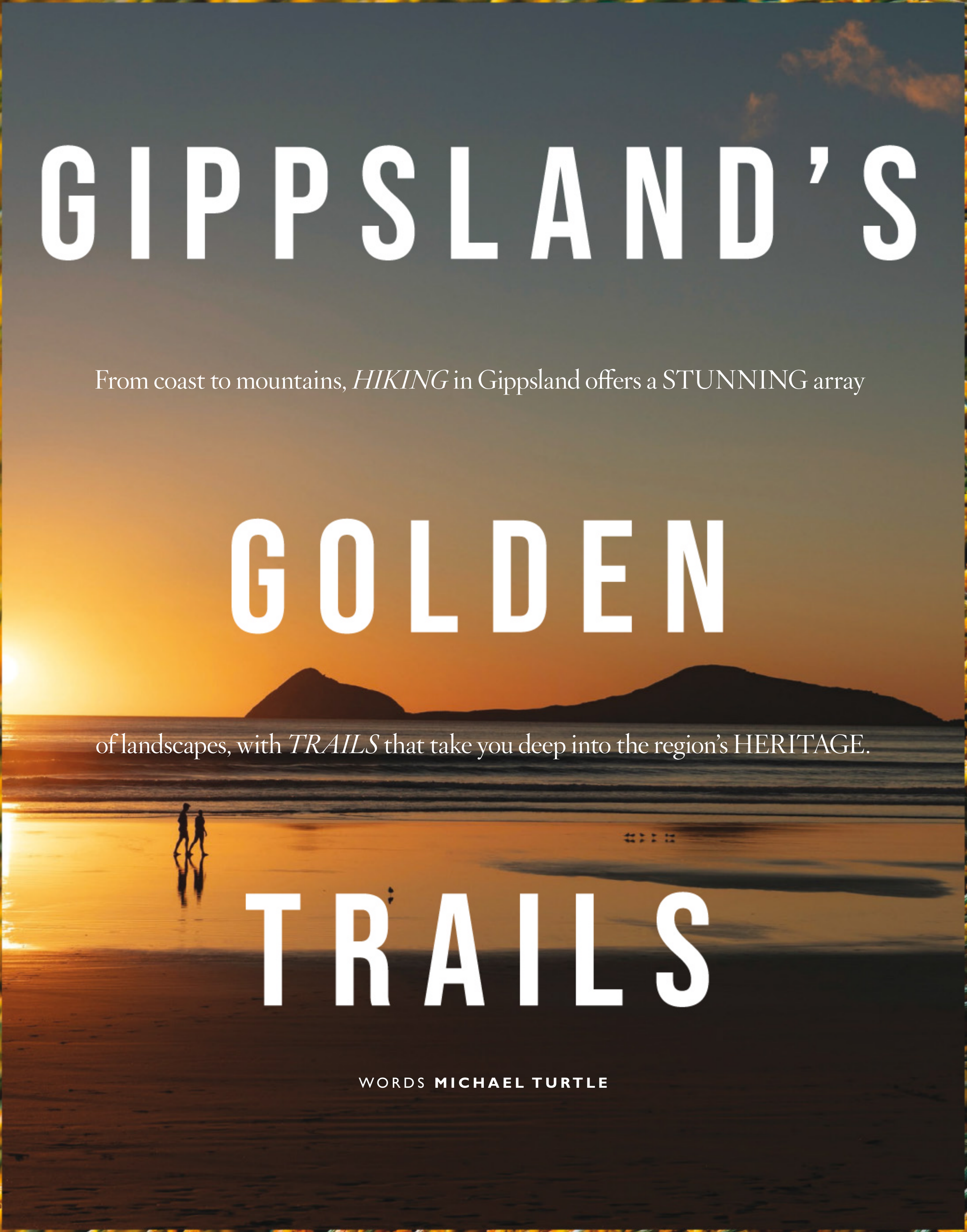
Wander through the seasonal splendour of **FOREST GLADE GARDENS** (*forestgladegardens.com.au*), hike to the summit of **HANGING ROCK**, or stroll around the tranquil **SANATORIUM LAKE**.

Drinking there

Settle in for a tasting at **BOOMTOWN** in Castlemaine (*boomtownwine.com.au*), sample local drops at the cosy **WOODEND CELLAR & BAR** (*woodendcellarandbar.com.au*), or wine-hop around the many cellar doors, such as **PASSING CLOUDS** (*passingclouds.com.au*).

BOOM
TOWN
WINERY
CELLAR BAR

PHOTOGRAPHY: VISIT VICTORIA (KYNETON SPRINGS MOTEL)



GIPPSLAND'S GOLDEN TRAILS

From coast to mountains, *HIKING* in Gippsland offers a STUNNING array of landscapes, with *TRAILS* that take you deep into the region's HERITAGE.

WORDS **MICHAEL TURTLE**

PHOTOGRAPHY: PARKS VICTORIA/JAMES LAURITZ (FLORA DETAIL); MARK WATSON (SUNSET WILSONS PROMONTORY NATIONAL PARK); TOURISM AUSTRALIA/TIME OUT AUSTRALIA (WILSONS PROMONTORY BEACH)

I STEP OUT onto the sand and it cries out underfoot. Kweek! I take another step and there's another little yelp. Screet! Picking up the pace, the sounds follow me like my shadow, all the way down to the water. It's obvious how this spot got its name – Squeaky Beach – from the rounded grains of quartz that make the distinctive sounds under pressure.

For many, Wilsons Promontory National Park is the gateway to Gippsland, and the best way to explore it is by walking its network of hiking trails, from coastal gems such as Squeaky Beach through to the bushland, among the wildlife. But it's still just a taste of what you'll find on foot in the region.

Venture a bit further into Gippsland and you'll discover the lakes, the rainforest, and the alpine peaks, each changing with the season and offering summer strolls or winter walks. Just like that squeaky sand, each step along these trails has something to tell you: perhaps a story about an ancient spirit or a pioneering search for fortune.

COASTAL CHARM

Wilsons Promontory National Park (or 'The Prom', as you'll end up calling it) is an easy three-hour drive from Melbourne/Naarm, but you might ditch the car when you arrive, with much of the park's 50,000 hectares accessible only by foot. From the inky water of Tidal River (dyed dark purple by abundant tea trees), I like the easy walks along the coast, among lichen-laden granite boulders, to golden beaches and bays. →

FROM LEFT: *Wilsons Promontory National Park is a sprawling wilderness with many coastal bushland trails; Walk 'The Prom's' golden sand beaches.*

The trail to the panoramic views at the summit of Mount Oberon is a bit harder, up steep timber and granite steps, but it's a popular 6.8-kilometre return. The more remote hikes are found through the open banksia and stringybark woodland of the park's north, or along the multi-day Southern Circuit, which ranges from about 35 to 52 kilometres, with sunrises and sunsets, kangaroos and cockatoos, and maybe even whales.

You might also see whales on the George Bass Coastal Walk, even closer to Melbourne on the western edge of Gippsland. This dramatic seven-kilometre trail along the clifftops takes in sweeping views of the wild ocean, occasionally dipping down from grassy green hills to coastal gullies and a secluded beach. It also now links into the Bass Coast Rail Trail for an extra 14 kilometres.

Over at the eastern edge of Gippsland, in Croajingolong National Park, you can wander along the lakeshores beneath koalas and around goannas (I keep my distance since one chased me here!). For those who are even more adventurous, the park is also the starting point for the 100-kilometre Wilderness Coast Walk, usually done over seven days.

MOUNTAIN BUSH

Deep in the Long Tunnel Extended Gold Mine at Walhalla, mining guide Richard tells me how this small town in the mountains east of Melbourne boomed when prospectors found gold here in 1862. These days, you'll find most of the town's treasure – its heritage – above ground, with the Walhalla Tramline Walk a wonderful way to explore it.

Just seven kilometres long, the walk takes you through decades of Gold Rush history, following the original rail trail from lush bushland to the mining sites, and through the charming village of just 20 residents with its wooden cottages and old shopfronts adorned with turn-of-the-century →

PHOTOGRAPHY: EVERYDAY NICKY (COUPLE ON MT OBERON); TOURISM AUSTRALIA/TIME OUT AUSTRALIA (KOOKABURRA, WILSONS PROMONTORY); VISIT VICTORIA/TIME OUT AUSTRALIA (GEORGE BASS COASTAL WALK); TOURISM AUSTRALIA (CROAJINGOLONG NATIONAL PARK DETAIL)

This dramatic trail takes in sweeping views of the wild ocean, dipping down from grassy hills to coastal gullies.

CLOWCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Panoramic views from the summit of Mount Oberon; Wilsons Promontory National Park is home to 180 native bird species including kookaburra; George Bass Coastal Walk trails for seven kilometres along clifftops.*

advertising posters. Blazing a trail where trailblazers once opened up the region, this is also the starting point for the 650-kilometre Australian Alps Walking Track.

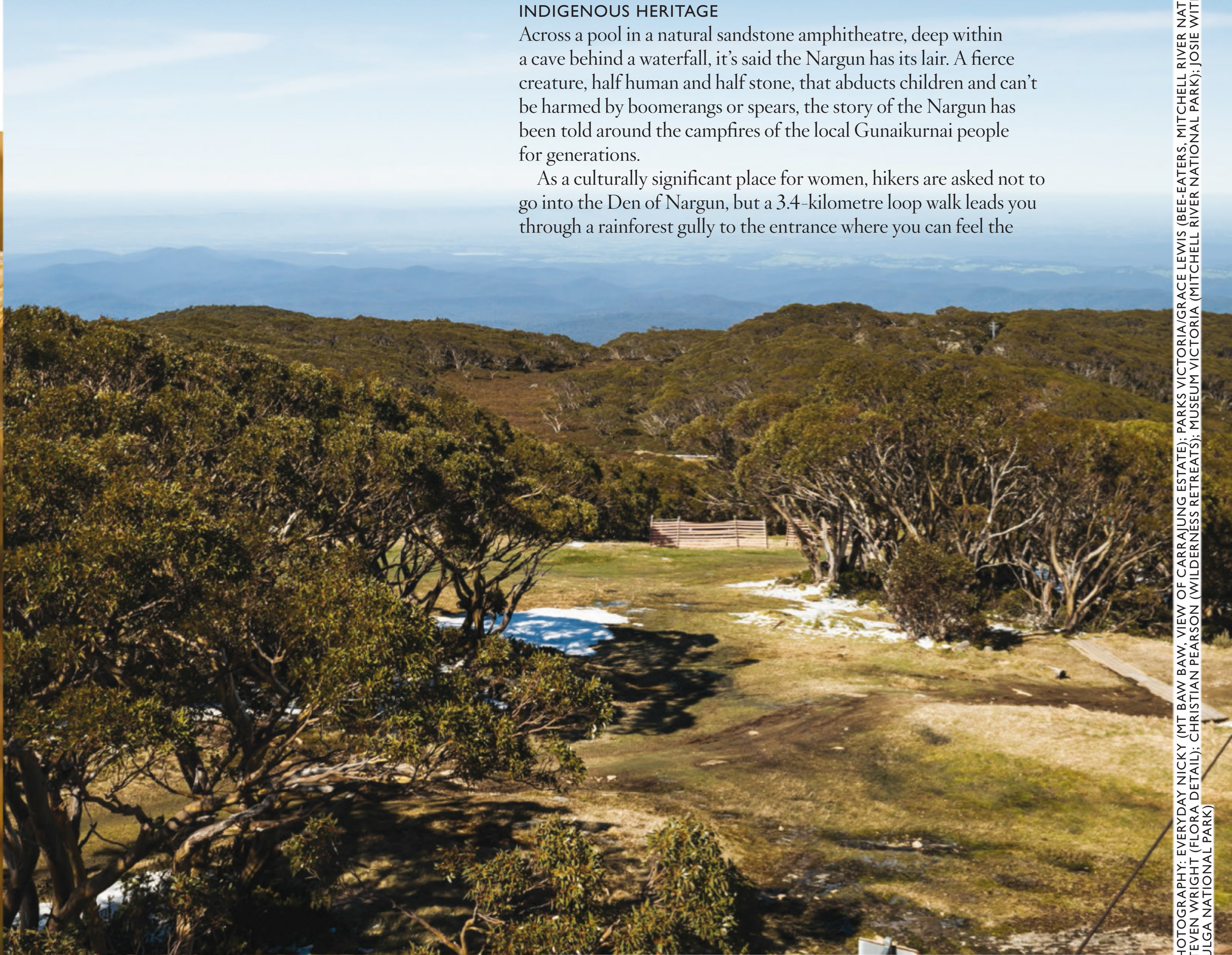
Nearby, Baw Baw National Park has walks through gnarled snow gums and alpine heaths that show off the colourful wildflowers in summer and the pristine carpet of white in winter. Several trails are perfect for snowshoes, including a 45-minute route from St Gwinear up to vast views across the Latrobe Valley.

Further up into the mountains, the Toorongo and Amphitheatre Falls Loop Walk is an easy 2.2-kilometre path that serenades you with the sound of flowing water as you pass mossy rocks and tree ferns en route to two sets of waterfalls cascading over boulders in the remote wilderness.

INDIGENOUS HERITAGE

Across a pool in a natural sandstone amphitheatre, deep within a cave behind a waterfall, it's said the Nargun has its lair. A fierce creature, half human and half stone, that abducts children and can't be harmed by boomerangs or spears, the story of the Nargun has been told around the campfires of the local Gunaikurnai people for generations.

As a culturally significant place for women, hikers are asked not to go into the Den of Nargun, but a 3.4-kilometre loop walk leads you through a rainforest gully to the entrance where you can feel the



PHOTOGRAPHY: EVERYDAY NICKY (MT BAW BAW, VIEW OF CARRAJUNG ESTATE); PARKS VICTORIA/GRACE LEWIS (BEE-EATERS, MITCHELL RIVER NATIONAL PARK); STEVEN WRIGHT (FLORA DETAIL); CHRISTIAN PEARSON (WILDERNESS RETREATS); MUSEUM VICTORIA (MITCHELL RIVER NATIONAL PARK); JOSIE WITHERS (TARRA BULGA NATIONAL PARK)

powerful atmosphere here in Mitchell River National Park, along Victoria's largest remaining wild and free-flowing waterway.

The Den of Nargun is part of the Bataluk Cultural Trail, a series of important traditional Gunaikurnai sites through central Gippsland. Another location is Victoria's largest cave system, Buchan Caves Reserve, with trails to important archaeological sites of human artefacts up to 18,000 years old. The FJ Wilson Interpreted Walk includes the naturally sculpted white limestone steps of the 400-metre-long Federal Cave, while the Granite Pools Walk goes among tall timber and moss-covered gullies.

Also important to the Gunaikurnai people is Tarra-Bulga National Park, known for its ancient myrtle beeches and enormous mountain ash trees. Just 40 minutes return, the Tarra Valley Rainforest Walk offers a taste of this verdant landscape, while the Grand Strzelecki Track takes you deep into the lost world of forest giants on an epic 100-kilometre trail rich with tradition.

A traveller's checklist

Staying there

WILDERNESS RETREATS in Wilsons Promontory offers glamping-style tents with luxurious queen beds. *parks.vic.gov.au*

STAR HOTEL is a reconstruction of a Gold Rush-era hotel from 1863 in the heart of heritage Walhalla. *starhotel.com.au*

CAVES HOUSE is a historic three-bedroom house with views over the Buchan River. *parks.vic.gov.au*

Eating there

KILCUNDA GENERAL STORE serves great coffee and meals of local produce at the George Bass Coastal Walk. *copperdoorkitchen.com*

ALPINE TROUT FARM is located near Toorongo Falls in Noojee. Fish for your own lunch and barbecue it with the provided cookware. *alpinetroutfarm.com.au*

CARRAJUNG ESTATE is a short drive from Tarra-Bulga National Park. The winery's restaurant offers a seasonal menu of regional ingredients and you can stay at The Lodge. *carrajung.com.au*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Enjoy a post-hike lunch at Carrajung Estate; The table is set for a seafood feast at the estate; Mitchell River National Park; The ancient rainforest of Tarra-Bulga National Park; Bee-eaters at Mitchell River National Park.* OPPOSITE FROM TOP: *Wilderness Retreats in The Prom; The alpine heath of Baw Baw National Park.*

RENEW IN THE GRAMPIANS

The Grampians just might be the *ULTIMATE* antidote for the METROPOLIS, writes one returning Aussie ready to *DISCONNECT* from the modern world and reconnect to the GREAT outdoors.

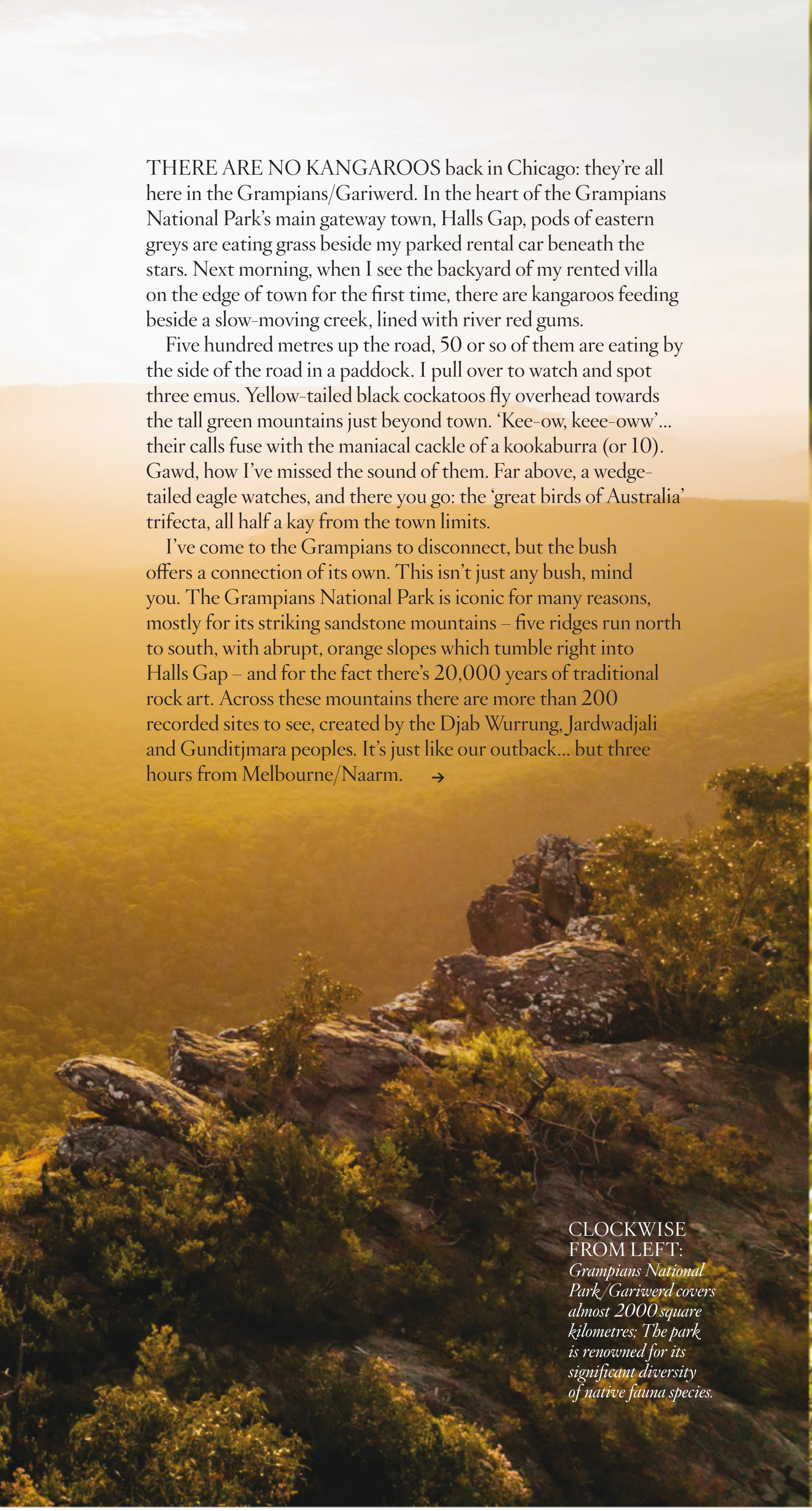
WORDS **CRAIG TANSLEY**

PHOTOGRAPHY: BEN SAVAGE (GRAMPIANS NATIONAL PARK); VISIT VICTORIA/ROBERT BLACKBURN (KANGAROOS)

THERE ARE NO KANGAROOS back in Chicago: they're all here in the Grampians/Gariwerd. In the heart of the Grampians National Park's main gateway town, Halls Gap, pods of eastern greys are eating grass beside my parked rental car beneath the stars. Next morning, when I see the backyard of my rented villa on the edge of town for the first time, there are kangaroos feeding beside a slow-moving creek, lined with river red gums.

Five hundred metres up the road, 50 or so of them are eating by the side of the road in a paddock. I pull over to watch and spot three emus. Yellow-tailed black cockatoos fly overhead towards the tall green mountains just beyond town. 'Kee-ow, keee-oww'... their calls fuse with the maniacal cackle of a kookaburra (or 10). Gawd, how I've missed the sound of them. Far above, a wedge-tailed eagle watches, and there you go: the 'great birds of Australia' trifecta, all half a kay from the town limits.

I've come to the Grampians to disconnect, but the bush offers a connection of its own. This isn't just any bush, mind you. The Grampians National Park is iconic for many reasons, mostly for its striking sandstone mountains – five ridges run north to south, with abrupt, orange slopes which tumble right into Halls Gap – and for the fact there's 20,000 years of traditional rock art. Across these mountains there are more than 200 recorded sites to see, created by the Djab Wurrung, Jardwadjali and Gunditjmara peoples. It's just like our outback... but three hours from Melbourne/Naarm. →



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Grampians National Park/Gariwerd covers almost 2000 square kilometres; The park is renowned for its significant diversity of native fauna species.*

Yellow-tailed black cockatoos fly overhead toward the tall green mountains just beyond town … their calls fuse with the maniacal cackle of a kookaburra.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS MCCONVILLE; GRIFFIN SIMM (BEEHIVE FALLS); VISIT VICTORIA (WILDFLOWER DETAIL)

CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE:
The best-known assets of Grampians National Park are easily reached by car; Walk to the base of Beehive Falls, one of the most spectacular waterfalls in the park; The Grampians is known for its striking sandstone mountains.

I've come here for a chance at renewal after the chaos of my life in America's third-largest city, Chicago, where I live for now, at the whim of a relative's cancer journey. Flying into Melbourne's airport, it only takes an hour's drive to feel far away from any concept of suburbia. When I arrive in Halls Gap two hours later, the restaurant I'm eating at clears out entirely by 7:45pm; Chicago already feels a lifetime ago.

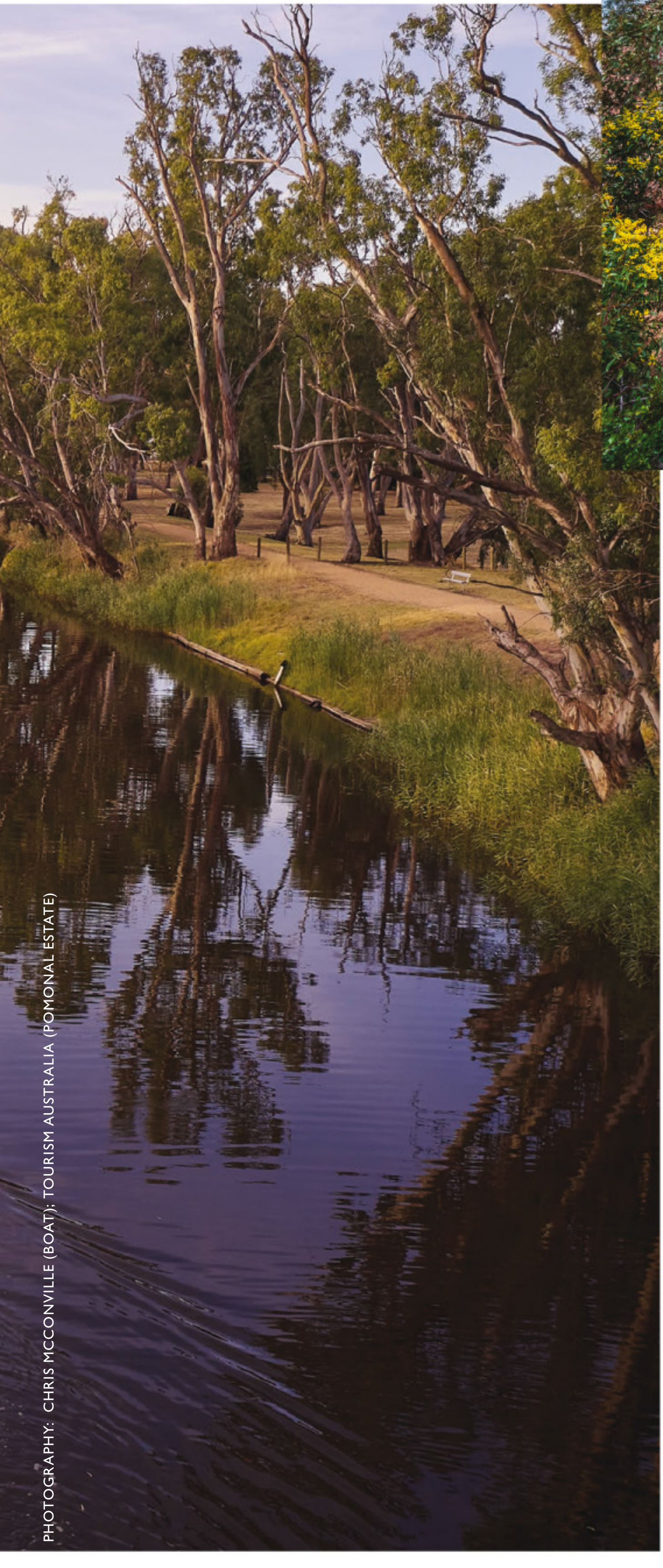
Though the national park covers almost 2000 square kilometres, its best-known landmarks are remarkably easy to access. From my carpark here, among the cockatoos and kangaroos on the fringe of Halls Gap, it only takes 60 seconds' driving time before I'm winding my way up a steep road through rainforest, deep into the mountains. Then it's five minutes more to a carpark that serves as a trailhead for a hike to one of the park's best vantage points, The Pinnacles. I walk for an hour or so, reacquainting myself with the smells and the sounds of the Aussie bush, before I reach it: a sheer cliff's edge lookout 500 metres up above Halls Gap.

There are hikes and there are lookouts and waterfalls all across this part of the park near town. Some are a short stroll from a carpark; others involve long, arduous hikes through forest. The longest is the Grampians Peaks Trail, Victoria's newest and longest iconic walk, which runs 160 kilometres – the entire length of Grampians National Park. Local activities operator Absolute Outdoors shows me glimpses of the trail. The company's owner, Adrian Manikas, says it's the best walk he's done in Australia. He says he's worked in national parks across the world, but this was the one he wanted to bring his children up in.

"There's something about the Grampians," he says, as he leads me up a path to where there's wooden platforms for tents, beside a hut looking straight out across western Victoria from a kilometre up in the sky (these are part of the guided hiking options for the trail). "There are things out here that you won't see anywhere else in Australia." Last summer, 80 per cent of the park was damaged by bushfire, but Manikas shows me its regrowth, and tells me of the manic effort put in by volunteers from town – with firefighters from all over Australia – to help save Halls Gap.

We drive back down to Halls Gap at dusk to abseil down a mountain under the stars, a few minutes' walk off the main road into town. We have headlamps, but a full moon is enough to light my way down. It takes blind faith to walk backwards down a mountain into a black void, though the upside is I can't see the extent of my descent. The stargazing is ruined by the moon, of course, but you should see how its glow lights up the orange of the sandstone, like in a theme park. When I'm done, I stand →

I’ve come to the Grampians to disconnect, but the bush offers a connection of its own.



PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS MCCONVILLE (BOAT); TOURISM AUSTRALIA (POMONAL ESTATE)

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *Travelling along the Wimmera River in Dimboola; Hollow Mountain is a popular abseiling site; Dine in a restaurant beside vines at Pomonal Estate.*

on a rocky plateau drinking hot chocolate and listening to the Aussie animals who prefer nighttime. I can see the streets of Halls Gap off in the distance on this Friday night. The restaurants may stay open until 8pm tonight.

You'll find all sorts of adventures out here – from rock climbing to canoeing to hiking – but there's more to the Grampians than a couple of thousand square kilometres of trees and mountains. Halls Gap may be known to most people, but what of Pomonal, and Dimboola, and Horsham? Here in the shadow of those big sandstone mountains there are towns and communities most of us don't know to visit.

And who knew that the Grampians is home to Victoria's most underrated wine region? My disconnection this morning comes not in a forest, but in the tasting rooms and winery restaurants of the district. Like Pomonal Estate, barely 10 minutes' drive east of Halls Gap, where UK-born chef Dean Sibthorp prepares a locally caught barramundi with lentil, pumpkin and finger lime in a restaurant beside the vines at the base of the Grampians. Husband-and-wife team Pep and Adam Atchison tell me stories as they pour their prize wines (shiraz is the hero in these parts).

Three minutes' drive back down the road, long-time mates Hadyn Black and Darcy Naunton run an eclectic cellar door out of a corrugated iron shed, near downtown Pomonal. The Christmas before last, half the houses in Pomonal burnt down in a bushfire, but these locals are a resilient lot. →

EST 1861
Salingers CAFE
LICENSED CAFE
COFFEE
Dimattina Coffee

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Great Western is a charming heritage town; Overlooking the vast Grampians landscape from Hollow Mountain; Kookaburras are one of some 230 bird species; Paper Scissors Rock in Halls Gap serves a great steak on naan bread.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBERT BLACKBURN (WALKING THROUGH CAFE, LIVEFAST CAFE HALLS GAP); GRIFFIN SIMM (SALINGERS OF GREAT WESTERN); DARREN DONLEN (KOOKABURRAS); WINE AUSTRALIAN (SUNSET)

The fires also didn't stop the construction of the first art centre in Australia dedicated to environmental art in a nature-based precinct a little further down the road (that's Wama – the National Centre for Environmental Arts), which opened in July. And some of the world's oldest and rarest grape vines have survived 160 years at Best's Wines, outside the heritage town of Great Western. There's plantings here from the year 1868, and there's wines stored in century-old barrels within 150-year-old tunnels beneath the tasting room. On the other side of town, Seppelt Wines' roots go back to 1865. They're both only a 30-minute drive from Halls Gap.

There's more to explore yet; I drive through tiny historic towns that barely make the map. Still part of the Grampians, they're as pretty as the mountains behind them: full of late 19th-century/early 20th-century post offices, government offices and bank buildings, converted now to all manner of bric-a-brac stores and cafes. The Imaginarium is one, in quirky Dimboola, where I sleep in the manager's residence of an old National Australia Bank after a gourmet dinner at the local golf club, run by noted chef and teacher, Cat Clarke – a pioneer of modern Indigenous Australian cooking. Just south, I spend an entire afternoon at a winery, Norton Estate Wines, set on rolling calico-coloured hills that make me think of Tuscany, chit-chatting with owners Chris and Sam Spence.

Being here takes me back two decades, when I lived here for a time. It had all seemed as foreign as if I'd driven to another planet back then (from Sydney/Warrane), but there seemed something inherently and immediately good about this place, like I'd lived here before.

And it's the Australian small-town familiarity of the Grampians that offers me connection back to my own country. Even in the better-known Halls Gap, Liz from Kerrie's Creations knows I like my lattes with soy milk and one sugar. And while I never do get the name of the lady at the local Ampol station, I sure know a lot about her life. You can be a local here in a day; how good is that? In Chicago, I don't even know who my neighbour is. Though each day at dusk – when the kangaroos gather outside my villa, and the kookaburras and the black cockatoos shout out loud before settling in to sleep – I prefer the quieter connection I get out there in the bush, beneath these orange mountains.

A traveller's checklist

Staying there

Sleep beside the wildlife on the edge of Halls Gap at **SERENITY**. *serenityholidayaccommodation.com.au*

Playing there

Go abseiling under the stars or join a guided hike with **ABSOLUTE OUTDOORS**. *absoluteoutdoors.com.au*

Visit **WAMA**, Australia's first environmental art centre. *wamafoundation.com.au*

Check out Dimboola's eccentric **IMAGINARIUM**. *dimboolaimaginarium.com*

Eating there

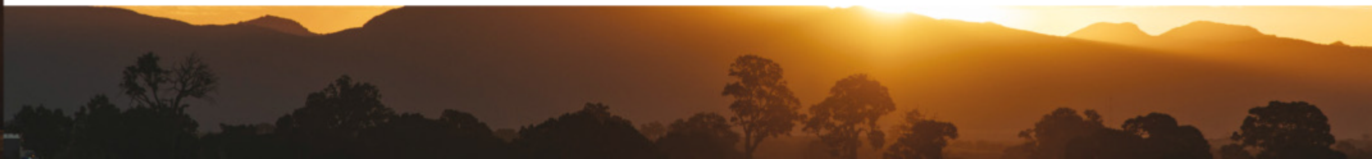
Eat world-class cuisine at **POMONAL ESTATE**. *pomonalestate.com.au*

Dine and stay at much-revered icon **ROYAL MAIL HOTEL** in Dunkeld. *royalmail.com.au*

The 'steak on naan' at Halls Gap brewhouse **PAPER SCISSORS ROCK**, can't be beat. *paperscissorsrock.beer*

For Halls Gap's best breakfasts head to **LIVEFAST CAFE**. *livefast.com.au*

Sip local wines at Great Western's historic wineries, **BEST'S WINES** (*bestswines.com*) and **SEPPELT WINES** (*seppelt.com.au*), and **NORTON ESTATE WINES**.



Accommodation @ Curlewis

Offering innovative, luxe accommodation that's just 15 minutes from Geelong and 90 minutes from Melbourne, Accommodation @ Curlewis is in the heart of The Bellarine. Sleeping up to 126 peple, the sophisticated eco-suites are nestled amidst Indigenous native landscapes, flanking one of Victoria's most revered golf courses. You'll delight in the spectacular views spanning green fairways and across the bay. Rest assured, every creature comfort is catered for.

1345 PORTARLINGTON RD, CURLEWIS
PH: (+61) 03 5251 1111
accommodationatcurlewis.com.au

WALLINGTON

Adventure Park

Dial up your summer at Victoria's biggest water park! Adventure Park offers awesome family fun for all ages, with unlimited rides on 23 wet and dry attractions. Float along the lazy river, take a spin on the Crazy Coaster or go with the whoaaa on epic waterslides, including the iconic Tornado and Tsunami. Victoria's first dueling trapdoor body slides, the brand new Thunder Falls, opens for the 2025/26 season. Do you dare to drop? Open 22 November 2025 – 29 March 2026.

1249 BELLARINE HWY, WALLINGTON
PH: (+61) 03 5250 7200
adventurepark.com.au

Bellarine Smokehouse & Provedore

Discover the best of the peninsula at Bellarine Smokehouse & Provedore, a one-stop shop for the finest local produce, artisan goods and a hand-picked selection of regional and international delights. From local cheese and free-range charcuterie to handcrafted jams, teas and sauces, every product is carefully curated and taste-tested for excellence. Don't miss the smoked fish and pâtés that are made in-house from sustainably sourced Australian and New Zealand premium seafood.

16/93 MURRADOC RD, DRYSDALE
PH: (+61) 0434 229 680
bellarinesmokehouse.com

QUEENSCLIFF

BIG4 Ingenia Holidays Queenscliff Beacon

BIG4 Ingenia Holidays Queenscliff Beacon offers a premium coastal escape ideal for couples and families alike. Nestled near the beach and close to the Bellarine Peninsula's top attractions, it features stylish villas, modern cabins and a fitness centre, plus a playground, games room and school holiday activities for kids. With its blend of relaxation, adventure and high-quality amenities, it's perfect for those seeking a memorable and comfortable getaway.

78 BELLARINE HWY, QUEENSCLIFF
PH: (+61) 03 5258 1133
ingeniaholidays.com.au/queenscliff

Geelong Racing Club

Experience the excitement of the Geelong Racing Club, home to Victoria's biggest country cup and holder of the coveted Melbourne Cup Golden Ticket. From the glamour of the biggest event on the local calendar, the Geelong Cup, through to the Super Saturday Coastal Classic, the events bring together fashion, food and live music in a unique setting. Perfect for travellers, it's more than just a day at the races – it's a chance to soak up Geelong's social and cultural scene.

99 BREAKWATER RD, GEELONG
PH: (+61) 03 5229 4414
grc.com.au

GRC
GEELONG
RACING CLUB

Novotel Geelong

Novotel Geelong is perfectly positioned for travellers keen to explore Victoria's stunning Bellarine Peninsula and Great Ocean Road, or those sailing on the *Spirit of Tasmania*. As Geelong's leading hotel, it blends comfort and convenience with seaside charm. Take a dip in the indoor heated pool or treat yourself to the award-winning Tempo Kitchen & Bar, which promises an unforgettable dining experience that pays homage to the rich local produce and flavours of Victoria.

10-14 EASTERN BEACH RD, GEELONG
PH: (+61) 03 5273 5528
novotelgeelong.com.au

NOVOTEL
GEELONG

QUEENSCLIFF

Sea All Dolphin Swims

Blending unforgettable underwater adventure with marine education, Sea All Dolphin Swims' award-winning tours will be the highlight of your holiday. The eco-certified, accessible tours take you to the protected waters of Pope's Eye, where you'll snorkel with dolphins, Australian fur seals and more incredible sea life. The tours – an important source of marine research, education and conservation – depart from Queenscliff, a short drive from Melbourne and the Great Ocean Road.

SHOP 3, BUILDING 6, QUEENSCLIFF HARBOUR
QUEENSCLIFF
PH: (+61) 03 5258 3889
dolphinswims.com.au

SEA ALL DOLPHIN SWIMS
QUEENSCLIFF

QUEENSCLIFF

TARRA Queenscliff

Perched over the water at Queenscliff, TARRA pairs bay views with produce from nearby growers, fishers and the chefs' foraging walks. The menu leans into house-made seasonal flavours – think local seafood and produce with coastal herbs – all served with a polished yet unpretentious touch. Drop in for a long lunch, pre-sailing snack or a glass from the smart Victorian wine list. You'll discover simple things done extraordinarily well, right on the edge of Port Phillip.

1 WHARF ST EAST, QUEENSCLIFF
PH: (+61) 03 5257 4599
tarra.com.au

TARRA
QUEENSCLIFF

MILDURA

Trail of Lights/Fibre Optic Symphonic Orchestra

Experience the magic of internationally celebrated artist Bruce Munro as he transforms the stunning Mildura Wentworth landscapes with two transcending art installations, *Trail of Lights* and *Fibre Optic Symphonic Orchestra (FOSO)*. Both *Trail of Lights* and *FOSO* (coming soon) create an unforgettable journey across two locations, blending art and nature. Don't miss your chance to witness art like never before.

LOCK ISLAND, MILDURA
PH: (+61) 03 5018 8380
mildura.com/lights/tickets

MILDURA

THE GATEWAY
EST 1990
Verde
Bottleshop Open Until 11pm Everyday
TAB
FOX FOOTY
Cellarbrations
OPEN FOR BUSINESS
FAMILY BISTRO
The Club Bar

The Gateway Mildura

Located close to the iconic Murray River on the main thoroughfare, The Gateway Mildura is more than a traditional pub or hotel; it's a vibrant space for delicious meals, exciting events and sports viewing. Formerly known as The Gateway Tavern, the thriving meeting spot has cemented its place among the best restaurants in Mildura, and is known for its warm ambience, exceptional service, delicious meals and beverages, and even the best coffee in the area.

CORNER OF 795-807 FIFTEENTH STREET
AND SAN MATEO AVE, MILDURA
PH: (+61) 03 5021 3288
thegatewaymildura.com.au

MILDURA

Verde Restaurant, Cafe & Bar

Welcome to Verde, Mildura's newest dining and entertainment destination. Verde means "green" in Italian, reflecting the venue's fresh ingredients, sustainable approach and lush decor. Enjoy metropolitan styling with marble bar tops, timber accents and vibrant greenery. By day, it's bright and inviting; by night, find a warm, lively atmosphere. Perfect for lunch, dinner, cocktails, special events or a relaxed coffee, Verde is where great food meets unique experiences. Bookings are essential.

CORNER OF 795-807 FIFTEENTH STREET
AND SAN MATEO AVE, MILDURA
PH: (+61) 03 5021 3288
verde.milduradining.com.au

PHOTOGRAPHY: TRAIL OF LIGHTS © 2025 BRUCE MUNRO. PHOTOGRAPHY BY SERENA MUNRO

DIMBOOLA

Dimboola Imaginarium

Walk into Dimboola Imaginarium and feel the charm of a heritage bank reimagined. Shelves brim with curios, clever design pieces and books you actually want to thumb through. The old vault is part of the magic, and the friendly team are happy to share tips for a wander along the Wimmera River or a bite on Lloyd Street. This is the kind of stop that turns a drive into a day out, with something unexpected for every traveller.

7-9 LOCHIEL ST, DIMBOOLA
PH: (+61) 0425 705 591
dimboolaimaginarium.com

MURTOA

The Stick Shed

The Murtoa Stick Shed is a must-see. Intimate yet with cathedral-like grandeur, you'll see and feel something that's uniquely Australian. It's visually stunning with a thrilling backstory – conceived and built in war time to revolutionise bulk grain storage, it has since beaten demolition attempts – and is now a treasured part of Australia's story, and one of only 121 sites on the National Heritage List. The Stick Shed is an accessible, dog-friendly attraction and is suitable for all ages.

1471 WIMMERA HWY, MURTOA
PH: (+61) 0434 227 921
thestickshed.com.au

MINIMAY

Lake Charlegrark Caravan Park

Roll up to Lake Charlegrark Caravan Park and camp right by the water. Don't have a van? Stay in one of the two new three-bed cabins or the fully renovated onsite van, linen included. Picture shady gums, roomy sites, tidy amenities and sunsets that spark a yarn with the neighbours. When the lake's up, launch the kayak or ski. When it's quiet, fish, birdwatch or wander the shoreline. With welcoming caretakers and an onsite cafe, this is simply West Wimmera camping at its best.

78 LAKE CHARLEGRARK RD, MINIMAY
PH: (+61) 0437 176 137
lakecharlegrark.com.au

LAKE CHARLEGRARK
CARAVAN PARK

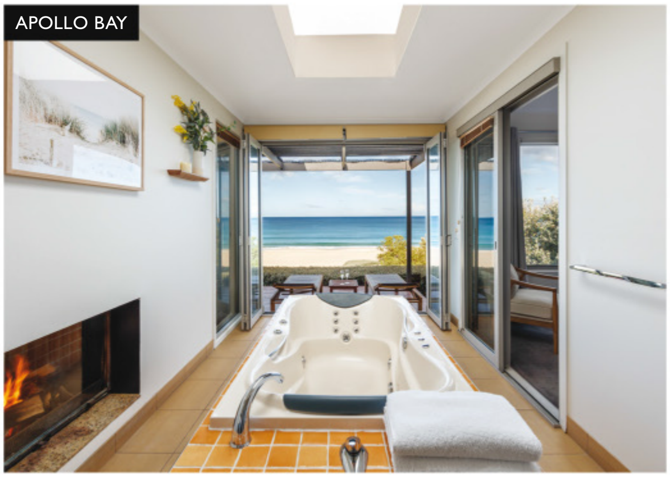
SEA LAKE

Skymirror Gallery, Cafe & Accommodation

Just minutes from Victoria's largest salt lake, Skymirror in Sea Lake is three things in one: a fine art photography gallery, a friendly cafe and comfortable accommodation. Browse Lake Tyrrell prints then settle in for breakfast or lunch with proper coffee in the pet-friendly courtyard. Stay the night in the central villa and rooms, which have space for families or small groups. Local knowledge and a short walk to the shops make it a practical base for exploring the Mallee.

60 BEST ST, SEA LAKE
PH: (+61) 0466 581 482
skymirror.com.au

SKYMIRROR



Chocolate Gannets

Find the perfect romantic couple's getaway at Chocolate Gannets' luxury villas in Apollo Bay, at the heart of the Great Ocean Road. Enjoy the luxurious spa baths, wood fireplaces and unbeatable ocean views, or take a stroll and spot wild koalas along the Koala Track, a revegetated habitat just behind the villas that supports native Australian wildlife. Chocolate Gannets is a proud member of 1% for the Planet.

6180 GREAT OCEAN RD, APOLLO BAY
PH: (+61) 0488 063 419
chocolategannets.com.au

PORT CAMPBELL

Anchors Port Campbell

Nestled in the hills above Port Campbell, just 10 minutes away from the 12 Apostles, Anchors Port Campbell offers three self-contained studio villas and a unique farm experience. Each studio features a luxurious king bed, fireplace and spa with breathtaking views, making this the ultimate romantic retreat. Gaze at the cattle by the dam or feed the donkey, pig and goat; come nightfall, marvel at the night sky. Look forward to discerning service and serenity at Anchors Port Campbell.

2549 COBDEN-PORT CAMPBELL RD, PORT CAMPBELL
PH: (+61) 0417 434 400
anchorsportcampbell.com.au

WARRNAMBOOL

Lady Bay Resort

Sitting on the stunning Warrnambool coastline, Lady Bay Resort offers the perfect blend of relaxation and adventure. Featuring spacious self-contained apartments, a day spa, pool, gym and an onsite restaurant, it's ideal for families, couples and corporate stays. Just moments from beaches, whale watching and the Great Ocean Road, Lady Bay Resort is your coastal escape for unforgettable experiences in Victoria's vibrant south-west.

2 PERTOBE RD, WARRNAMBOOL
PH: (+61) 03 5562 1662
ladybayresort.com.au

BIG4 Ingenia Holidays Torquay

Kick off your Great Ocean Road escape at BIG4 Ingenia Holidays Torquay! Just minutes from Bells Beach and a short stroll to Torquay's stunning shores, you can choose from modern cabins, pet-friendly stays or scenic camping and caravan sites. Check out over 20 nearby beaches or enjoy the heated pool and spa, mini golf, tennis and more. Whether you're chasing adventure or relaxing with family, your next coastal getaway starts here.

55 SURF COAST HWY, TORQUAY
PH: (+61) 03 5261 2493
ingeniaholidays.com.au/our-parks/victoria/big4-ingenia-holidays-torquay

Bimbi Park

Camp under the koalas at Bimbi Park, a nature escape in the heart of Cape Otway. Stay in cabins, glamping pods or bush campsites surrounded by towering rainforest and wildlife. Perfectly placed for the Great Ocean Road and Great Ocean Walk, Bimbi Park blends adventure and tranquillity, making it one of Victoria's most unforgettable stays.

90 MANNA GUM DR, CAPE OTWAY
PH: (+61) 03 5237 9246
bimbipark.com.au

bimbipark camping under koalas

Forrest Haus Retreat

Forrest Haus Retreat is an architecturally designed three-bedroom boutique stay in Victoria's Otways Hinterland. Crafted by hosts Lisa and Matt with local makers and designers, it features high ceilings, generous natural light and a central wood fire. Guests enjoy an inviting outdoor bath, fire pit under the stars and framed views of Indigenous gardens. The retreat has been sustainably created and curated for guests to destress, relax, connect and explore the region.

50 STATION ST, FORREST
PH: (+61) 0435 947 984
hausretreat.com.au

HAUS RETREAT

WARRNAMBOOL

Deep Blue Hotel & Hot Springs

Deep Blue Hotel & Hot Springs in Warrnambool is a coastal resort renowned for its Hot Springs Sanctuary, home to natural geothermal mineral waters and 18 unique bathing pools. The experience continues with its exquisite hotel-style accommodation, an indoor bath house, day spa, salt therapy, dining and much more. Visit Deep Blue Hotel & Hot Springs to discover a complete destination of relaxation and renewal.

WORM BAY RD, WARRNAMBOOL
PH: (+61) 03 5559 2000
thedeepblue.com.au

DEEP BLUE
HOTEL & HOT SPRINGS
WARRNAMBOOL

WENSLEYDALE

Charleson Farm

Escape to Charleson Farm, where every moment celebrates life's simple joys – family, friends, good food and laughter. With panoramic views and peaceful surrounds, this pet-friendly retreat invites you to unwind, reconnect and breathe deeply. Designed for comfort and relaxation, it's a place to gather, share stories and savour the beauty of nature and farm life.

265 CENTRE RD, WENSLEYDALE
PH: (+61) 0418 636 654
charlesonfarm.com.au

Charleson Farm

APOLLO BAY
GREAT OCEAN WALK
Walk Victoria's Icons

Walk91

Led by an ex-Parks Victoria ranger who helped build the Great Ocean Walk, Walk91 offers 20 years of specialised expertise on this iconic trail. Offering flexible self-guided or guided tours, Walk91 staff manage all accommodation, luggage transfers and food, and provide real-time support. Enjoy a stress-free, unforgettable adventure along Victoria's breathtaking coastline, with unmatched local knowledge dedicated to bringing your Great Ocean Walk journey to life.

100 COLLINGWOOD ST, APOLLO BAY
PH: (+61) 0490 428 573
walk91.com.au

WALK91 GREAT OCEAN WALK TOURS

Archers Torquay

Welcome to Archers Torquay, the home of fine wine and good times; this coastal wine bar celebrates the best in food, wine and community. Explore the cellar that holds over 200 local and international wines, and try hand-crafted cocktails, seasonal plates and a sensational Steak Frites Night. Whether you're after an intimate gathering or a vibrant night with live music, Archers Torquay is your destination for the best coastal hospitality.

T11, 222 FISCHER ST, TORQUAY
PH: (+61) 0431 422 081
archerstorquay.com.au

ARCHERS TORQUAY

TORQUAY
Theatre

Australian National Surfing Museum

The Australian National Surfing Museum in Torquay, Australia's surfing capital, celebrates the story of surfing. The museum charts Australia's significant contribution to the development of surfing around the world, and commemorates the nation's fantastic surfing heritage. Immerse yourself in one of Australia's most popular pastimes, experience surfing's sense of fun and marvel at the changes that have taken place over the years.

77 BEACH RD, TORQUAY
PH: (+61) 03 5261 4606
australiannationalsurfingmuseum.com.au

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL SURFING MUSEUM TORQUAY VICTORIA

LAVERS HILL

The Perch – Restaurant, Winery & Gardens

As lifelong hospitality professionals, Dean and Gabrielle, founders of The Perch, are passionate about everything food, wine and service. From sourcing the finest local produce to crafting delicious, memorable flavors, they strive to create a warm and comfortable environment for guests. Enjoy the breathtaking views, feed native birds or take a stroll through the gardens and old-growth forest walking trails. You might even spot the resident koalas or spectacular glow worms.

1-15 GREAT OCEAN RD, LAVERS HILL
PH: (+61) 03 5237 3110
theperchlavershill.com.au

THE PERCH WINERY · RESTAURANT · GARDENS

LANCEFIELD

Curly Flat Vineyard

Curly Flat Vineyard, located in Lancefield within the highlands of Victoria's beautiful Macedon Ranges, is a small, privately owned, estate-based vineyard and winery. Growers of high quality pinot noir, chardonnay and pinot gris, the winery's reputation for impeccable attention to detail is renowned. The Curly Flat team is committed to producing the best possible wines from the carefully nurtured site, and the welcoming cellar door is housed in a restored 1880s homestead with open fires in winter.

263 COLLIVERS RD, LANCEFIELD
PH: (+61) 03 5429 1956
curlyflat.com

Hanging Rock Winery

Since 1983, the Ellis family has welcomed guests to Hanging Rock Winery with warmth and hospitality. The fifth-generation winemakers invite you to relax, taste over 20 wines and enjoy local produce platters while soaking in the region's most iconic views. Wander at your leisure through the 'Art in the Vines' sculpture exhibition, where art meets nature across three acres of gardens. Open 10am–5pm, seven days a week, the Ellis family looks forward to sharing their place with you.

88 JIM ROAD, NEWHAM
PH: (+61) 03 5427 0542
hangingrock.com.au

KYNETON
KYNETON RIDGE

Kyneton Ridge – Winery, Cafe & Art Space

Nestled in the ancient Pyalong granites of the Macedon Ranges, Kyneton Ridge is a sustainably certified vineyard and family-run estate redefining cool-climate elegance. From regenerative viticulture to minimal-intervention winemaking, the Wood family brings depth, precision and provenance to every bottle. With small-batch classics like Pinot Noir Reserve and a vibrant vermentino, plus a cellar door, cafe and art space, this is where terroir meets creativity, on and off the vine.

517 BLACKHILL RD, KYNETON
PH: (+61) 0408 841 119
kynetonridge.com.au

CARLSRUHE
PARAMOOR

Paramoor Winery

Once a Clydesdale horse farm, Paramoor Estate is now a boutique winery in the Macedon Ranges, renowned for its elegant cool-climate wines including pinot noir, riesling and pinot gris. The rustic barn cellar door offers intimate tastings in a setting rich with history and charm. Alongside its celebrated wines, Paramoor Estate is a romantic destination for weddings and events, where country hospitality and timeless character create unforgettable moments.

439 THREE CHAIN RD, CARLSRUHE
PH: (+61) 0409 634 649
paramoor.com.au

ELTHAM

Montsalvat

Established in 1934 in Eltham, Montsalvat is an artistic community that's provided thousands of painters, sculptors, musicians, writers, philosophers, poets and other makers with the time, space and support to further their creative practice. Today, Montsalvat offers art classes, studio places and residencies to experienced and aspiring artists, alongside numerous events and private function facilities spread across three dozen unique heritage-listed buildings on five hectares of stunning grounds.

7 HILLCREST AVE, ELTHAM
PH: (+61) 03 9439 7712
montsalvat.com.au

HEALESVILLE

Jayden Ong Winery & Cellar Bar

Located in the heart of Healesville, Jayden Ong Winery & Cellar Bar invites you to discover an unforgettable food and wine experience. Jayden & Morgan's passion for exceptional produce and heartfelt service shines through, offering moments that exceed expectations for couples, groups and private celebrations. The menu celebrates charcoal-cooked dishes paired with Jayden Ong's four wine ranges or an impressive list of global and local icons. It's open Thursday to Sunday.

8 HUNTER RD, HEALESVILLE
PH: (+61) 0487 888 866
jaydenong.com

LILYDALE

Lilydale Pine Hill Caravan Park

Enjoy ultimate comfort in Lilydale Pine Hill's modern cabins, or bring your own tent, caravan or camper trailer. Ideally located to explore the stunning Yarra Valley, Dandenong Ranges and Warburton region, Lilydale Pine Hill offers the perfect base for your next adventure. Unwind around the fire pit after a day of roaming the region, and visit the on-site information centre to plan tomorrow's journey.

105 WARBURTON HWY, LILYDALE
PH: (+61) 03 9735 4577
lilydalepinehill.com.au

REGION-WIDE

Valley Ranges Getaways

Discover the beauty of the Dandenong Ranges with Valley Ranges Getaways' handpicked collection of boutique retreats. From romantic hideaways and family escapes to group stays and pet-friendly havens, every property is designed to inspire. Nestled near charming villages, forest trails and world-renowned gardens, the homes offer the perfect balance of seclusion and connection. Each stay promises comfort, relaxation and memorable moments.

PH: 1300 48 84 48
valleyrangesgetaways.com.au

Global Ballooning

Experience the #1 sunrise balloon flights with Global Ballooning, owned by Australia's only fourth-generation aviation family and trusted for over 30 years. With 150,000 passengers flown and thousands of five-star reviews, Global Ballooning is renowned for award-winning safety, professionalism and unforgettable adventures above Melbourne city and the Yarra Valley. CBD return transfers and complimentary GoPro photos ensure your magical memories last a lifetime.

30 DICKMANN ST, RICHMOND
PH: (+61) 03 9428 5703
globalballooning.com.au

GLOBAL BALLOONING

COLDSTREAM

Punt Road Wines

Opened in October 2025, Punt Road Wines' new cellar door injects fresh energy into the Yarra Valley winery scene. Next door to Meletos restaurant and The Farmhouse accommodation, surrounded by the vineyards, it's a one-stop destination that celebrates wine, food and hospitality. Enjoy guided tastings of their single-vineyard, cool-climate wines under the high ceilings and cast-iron chandeliers of the barrel hall. It's a welcoming spot to settle in and savour the best of the region.

12 ST HUBERTS RD, COLDSTREAM
PH: (+61) 03 9739 0666
puntroadwines.com.au

PUNT ROAD

WANDIN EAST
Cherry, cherry delicious
Cherry, cherry delicious

CherryHill Orchards

Nestled in Victoria's lush Yarra Valley, CherryHill Orchards invites visitors to indulge in a truly premium cherry-picking experience. Wander through rows of vibrant cherry trees, handpicking the juiciest fruit at its peak, while soaking in sweeping views of rolling hills and countryside charm. With 85 years of family heritage, CherryHill Orchards offers an unforgettable taste of summer, perfect for couples, families or gourmands seeking a quintessentially Australian farm-to-table adventure.

474 QUEENS RD, WANDIN EAST
PH: 1300 243 779
cherryhill.com.au

CherryHill ORCHARDS

YARRA VALLEY
GO WILD BALLOONING

Go Wild Ballooning

Go Wild Ballooning is Melbourne's original Yarra Valley hot air ballooning company, and has been family-owned and operated since 1989. Take flight at sunrise for breathtaking views of vineyards, mountain ranges and the Melbourne skyline. Whether it's a romantic escape, special celebration or group adventure, the flights offer an unforgettable experience high above Victoria's most scenic region. Enjoy expert pilots, free in-flight photography and an optional champagne breakfast – all just an hour from Melbourne.

YARRA VALLEY, CHIRNSIDE PARK
PH: (+61) 03 9739 0772
gowildballooning.com.au

GO WILD BALLOONING

YARRA RANGES
REGIONAL MUSEUM

Stories that pair perfectly with wine,
walks and weekend adventures.

Lilydale, Victoria
Free entry
yarraranges.vic.gov.au/museum

YARRA RANGES REGIONAL MUSEUM

Yarra Ranges Council

Yarra Valley &
Dandenong Ranges

visityarravalley.com.au

Stunning nature, beautiful views,
delicious places to eat, awesome
playgrounds, fantastic walks.

FIND YOUR SELF | MELBOURNE'S YARRA VALLEY AND DANDENONG RANGES

CULTURE

historic regional theatres · what's on · shop local products

BALLARAT IN BLOOM

Take in the beauty and vibrancy of begonias at the annual Ballarat Begonia Festival, where you can admire more than 500 varieties of this perennial species over two days every March. Turn to page 160 for more.

PHOTOGRAPHY: MEDA DESIGN

REX THEATRE
SAT - TUE 8PM SUN 2PM
PENGUIN BLOOM

Theatre ROYALE

Theatres have always been a *CORNERSTONE* of regional Victoria, reflecting the *CHARACTER* and history of their *LOCAL* communities, finds Ricky French.

FROM GRAND, GOLD RUSH-ERA masterpieces to Art Deco wonders to repurposed prisons, we've rounded up four of Victoria's best regional theatres to catch a show at next time you're travelling through.

HER MAJESTY'S THEATRE, BALLARAT

A monument to the immense gold rush wealth flooding through Ballarat in the second half of the 19th century, Her Majesty's Theatre ('Her Maj' to locals) celebrates its 150th anniversary as the city's premier performing arts venue this year. Built in a classical style and immaculately preserved (thanks largely to a recent $16-million restoration), this Lydiard Street landmark is the oldest continuously operating theatre in mainland Australia, notable for its double balcony and a stage that slopes towards the front, making it one of the most audience-friendly venues in the country to see a show.

PHOTOGRAPHY: JENNY POLLARD (INSIDE REX THEATRE); MICHAEL PHAM (DETAIL)

CLOWKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: *The 1938-built Rex Theatre in Charlton is an Art Deco gem; The Capital in Bendigo was built in 1873 as a Masonic Hall; Inside Bendigo's Ulumbarra Theatre, a former prison; Her Majesty's Theatre in Ballarat has been standing for 150 years.*

THE CAPITAL, BENDIGO
Denoted by its distinctive Corinthian columns, more reminiscent of ancient Greece than regional Victoria, The Capital theatre in Bendigo has been through several iterations since the first stone was laid in 1873. Originally a Masonic hall, the renaissance revival-style building became a theatre in the 1890s, falling into disrepair for a time during the 1970s, before being restored and reopened (as the Bendigo Regional Arts Centre) in 1991. Today, the 480-seat venue hosts everything from comedy to cabaret to traditional theatre, dance, opera and live music.

ULUMBARRA THEATRE, BENDIGO
Bendigo has busted out as a regional performing arts hotspot, so it's fitting that one of its newest venues is housed within a former prison. Meaning 'meeting place' or 'gather together' in the language of the local Dja Dja Wurrung people, the $26-million, 950-seat auditorium rose from within the red brick walls of the historic Sandhurst Gaol in 2015. It's an eerie feeling as you approach the imposing granite facade, pass beneath the old gallows and pick up your ticket from the box office occupying a repurposed cell block. With the building playing a main character in the show, this is performative architecture at its finest.

REX THEATRE, CHARLTON
Regional theatres don't come more romantic than this Art Deco gem in the river town of Charlton, in north-central Victoria. Built in 1938, the 350-seat community-owned theatre provides an essential entertainment outlet for residents in the Wimmera Mallee region, as well as visitors making the trip up the Calder Highway from Melbourne/Naarm. The volunteer-run venue is the last remaining purpose-built cinema in regional Victoria, and hosts the Charlton Film Festival every February, plus three weekly film screenings (Tuesday, Saturday and Sunday).

WHAT'S ON IN VICTORIA

From *CYCLING* and comedy to *BOATING* and begonia appreciation, there's an event in *REGIONAL* Victoria that's sure to have you circling dates on your *CALENDAR*.

< 24–26 JANUARY, 2026

Festival of Sails

This five-day regatta of sailing and onshore entertainment at Geelong's waterfront includes Australia's oldest sporting event, the Melbourne to Geelong passage race which, in 2026, will be held for its 183rd year. But you don't have to be a yachtie, sailor or boat-enthusiast to enjoy the nautical excitement; there's also a three-day line-up of entertainment, food and live music, including the anchoring of tall ships – ever a firm family favourite. festivalofsails.com.au

31 JANUARY – 1 FEBRUARY, 2026

CADEL EVANS GREAT OCEAN ROAD RACE

Meandering (at pace) along the Bellarine Peninsula and the Surf Coast is this annual cycling event that welcomes everyone from families to serious athletes. Since its beginnings in 2015, the race has become a huge hit with spectators flocking along to cheer on Lycra-clad competitors. Starting and finishing in Geelong's Velo Village, this is the hub of the non-race activity with food and drink, roaming performers, lawn games and face painting. cadelevansgreatoceanroadrace.com.au

13–15 FEBRUARY, 2026 >

Riverboats Music Festival

Get along to bop and sway under the canopy of red gums at this annual music festival. Hosted by the twin towns of Echuca–Moama, the stage is set for Murray River-adjacent revelling as historic paddlesteamers peacefully chug alongside the event. As well as music, there's dancing, food trucks and plenty of atmosphere to absorb. riverboatsmusic.com.au

28 FEBRUARY – 15 MARCH, 2026

NEERIM ARTSFEST

This biennial Gippsland festival celebrates sculptural artists with an esteemed award in two categories, large outdoor and small indoor. The public is invited to enjoy the works over the exhibition period as they're placed throughout Neerim South and surrounding venues. For 2026, the theme 'The Spirit Soars' leads artists to create stunning pieces that explore the expression of freedom in a thrilling visual capacity.

6–9 MARCH, 2026

Port Fairy Folk Festival

In 2026, this beloved festival will be one year shy of its 50th anniversary. From folk fans to festival-lovers, this long-running event brings plenty of good vibes to guarantee an incredible experience. While music is at the heart of the festival, there's also a range of workshops, exhibitions and family entertainment across dance, film and folk art. For its 49th year, the line-up so far includes Blair Dunlop, Elephant Sessions, and the musical duo Felicity Urquhart and Josh Cunningham. *portfairyfolkfestival.com*

WORDS: LARA PICONE PHOTOGRAPHY: SALTY DINGO (FESTIVAL OF SAILS); VISIT VICTORIA (GREAT OCEAN ROAD RACE); NICKY CAWOOD (NEERAM ARTSFEST); LUCINDA GOODWIN (MISSY HIGGINS AT PORT FAIRY FOLK FESTIVAL); ANTHONY EVANS PHOTOGRAPHY (GRAMPIANS GRAPE ESCAPE)

5–9 MARCH, 2026

ChillOut Festival

Pride in the country has been cheered on every March in Daylesford since 1997 with the riotous annual LGBTQIA+ ChillOut Festival. This colourful regional spectacle is an inclusive celebration of diversity that plays out across a vibrant parade, burlesque performances, a bush dance and a carnival. Get bedazzled, find a wig and stick on the false eyelashes for this fun party. *chilloutfestival.au*

3–6 APRIL, 2026

THE BENDIGO EASTER FESTIVAL

Held in the city's Rosalind Park, the annual Easter Festival has been a highlight of Bendigo's calendar of events since 1871. A carnival of colourful activity, the festival welcomes everyone and rolls out the good times with everything from a Good Friday Easter egg hunt to live music and performances, a Rotary market and Gala Parade. Don't miss the world's longest imperial dragon rhythmically roaming the historic streets as part of the Easter Sunday festivities. bendigoeasterfestival.org.au

< MARCH 2026

The Ballarat Begonia Festival

In bloom since 1953, this horticultural event places a collection of rare begonias at the centre of festivities, honouring the flower's presence in Ballarat since the 1800s. During its history, the event has been visited by Queen Elizabeth II and, in 2015, it featured the launch of the largest outdoor Lego flower. Apart from a display of around 500 species of the flower of the moment, there's also a begonia parade, entertainment, live music, food and presentations. ballaratbegoniafestival.com

1–3 MAY, 2026 >

Grampians Grape Escape

Backdropped by gorgeous Grampians/Gariwerd National Park, this much-loved bacchanalian-inspired festival of food, wine and music is a high-priority for gourmands. Held at Halls Gap Reserve, a Tasting Ticket includes a tumbler that unlocks free wine, beer and cider tastings and, if you are partaking, there's a shuttle bus to get you back to your digs afterwards. Be sure to book your accommodation early for this one – its popularity is undisputed. *grampiansgrapeescape.com.au*

GRAMPIANS
GRAPE·ESCAPE

COMEDY IN THE VINES

< 24–26 OCTOBER, 2026

COMEDY IN THE VINES

The premise of Yarra Valley's Comedy in the Vines, held at Cherryhill Orchards, is that wine and laughs pair well. Few arguments can be made, so get along this month (or next year), to have a giggle and a gamay. This year, taking the stage is the likes of Merrick Watts, Tommy Little, Ray O'Leary and Takashi Wakasugi. There are also masterclasses, a riesling and oyster shot bar, and plenty of food and music between gigs. comedyinthevines.com

2

WATTLE SEED

3

RG
FIRMING ELIXIR

1

Balsamic Vinegar Salt
GIPPSLAND SALT COMPANY
Smokey Southern Salt
GIPPSLAND SALT COMPANY
Smoked S.P.G. Salt
GIPPSLAND SALT COMPANY

4

THE GRAMPIANS GOODS CO
montane
AROMATIC CANDLE

5

YARRA VALLEY
BLOODY SHIRAZ GIN CAVIAR

From Victoria with love

Elevate your *SOUVENIR stash* with these beautiful and DELICIOUS products born and bred in *REGIONAL* Victoria.

6

LARD ASS
GHEE

10

9

8

7

1. Gippsland Salt Company, **SALT BLENDS**, $12.50; *gippslandsaltco.com.au* **2.** Penni Ave Distillery, Wattleseed and Burnt Honey **VODKA,** $75; *penniave.com.au* **3.** Rich Glen Olive Oil, **FIRMING ELIXIR**, $53; *richglenoliveoil.com* **4.** Grampians Goods Co, Montane **CANDLE**, $59; *grampiansgoodsco.com.au* **5.** Yarra Valley Caviar x Four Pillars, Bloody Shiraz Gin **CAVIAR**, $26.90; *yarravalleycaviar.com.au* **6.** Lard Ass, **GHEE**, $22; *lardass.com.au* **7.** Creswick Woollen Mills, Recycled Wool **PICNIC BLANKET**, $99; *creswickwool.com* **8.** Wootten Leathersmiths, Market **TOTE BAG** in saddle tan, $600; *wootten.com.au* **9.** Pete Cromer, Budgerigar **BEANIE TOY**, $24.95; *petecromer.com* **10.** Bendigo Pottery, Organic Lip **PLATE**, $28.95; *bendigopottery.com.au*

GIPPS
all kinds of wonder
LAND

VENTURE EAST

Paddle out across glassy lakes, wander lush forest trails and savour quality local food and drink. East Gippsland delivers the best of coast and country in one bucket-list road trip. Expect warm welcomes, bold flavours and plenty of reasons to linger longer.

visitgippsland.com.au

Mallacoota, East Gippsland

THE SOUTH OF THE BORDER BIT

When exploring Victoria, take a chance on some wonderfully weird attractions that feel a world away from your everyday.

Transport yourself to places like Australia's largest cactus garden, Cactus Country.

VICTORIA EVERY BIT DIFFERENT

VISITVICTORIA.COM